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HE FLUNG HIMSELF DOWN ON THE FERN BESIDE HER.

## A SCATHING ORDEAL;

Or, MAY LANGLEY'S MAD MARRIAGE.

BY MRS. GEORGINA DICKENS.

### CHAPTER I.

WHAT WAS THE MYSTERY.

"AY, you may think there's joy up at the Hall to-day, but it's nearer like a curse. This

day a year ago the old master passed away—a death then, a birth to-day—and to my way o' thinking, this day will bring a sorrow that one never could. Well, well, it's the way of the world—sorrow and joy, joy and sorrow; and the two are near akin to each other."

"My word, granny, how you do go on! There might be some sense in what you say if 'twas some poor person's child; but this baby is heiress to Normanton, and goodness knows what besides. She'll find pleasure enough in this world, I'll be bound."



There was something of regret and discontent in the girl's voice, and involuntarily a sigh escaped her as she bent her head lower over her work.

She had been turning the ribbon on a straw hat which had seen some wear, endeavoring, with a good deal of ingenuity, to hide the parts which the sun had faded; but, try as she would, she could not arrange it to her satisfaction.

Impatiently tossing the hat aside, she rose and stood with her folded arms resting on the window-sill, gazing out thoughtfully through the open casement over the beautiful grounds, which stretched before her almost as far as the eye could reach.

The old woman watched her for a moment or two in silence; then she too sighed. Going up to the young girl, she laid her withered, work-worn hand gently on the soft, rounded shoulder.

"I know what's in your heart, Bess, my girl; I can read your thoughts just as plain as—"

Innocent as the words were, they made her granddaughter start nervously, and look with anxious inquiry into her face.

"What d'you mean?" she asked, quickly.

"Only this, child; that you've no cause to envy that poor babe up yonder. It'll have its share of trouble like the rest of us. 'Tisn't money that brings happiness."

"I'd like to have the chance to try, that's all!" rejoined Bess, with a short laugh. "Why should some folks have all they want, and more besides, when we've got so little. 'Tisn't right, that's what I say—'tisn't right!"

"Hush, girl, hush! You've no right to say that. If it hadn't been for Mr. Langley we might have been turned away from the lodge, and goodness only knows where we'd have gone then. It's not every one coming to a property would have been so willing to have kept on an old servant. No, no; he's a good master, and we ought to be grateful. Poor gentleman, he don't seem to be happy, for all his riches. I never saw a man more cast down and doleful like."

"Oh, he's been anxious about his wife, I fancy, that's all, Granny. You'll see he will be bright enough now the baby is come."

"That's as it may be. I've a word I could say about it if I'd a mind to," mumbled the old woman, oracularly, as she turned away from the window and resumed her seat in the chimney corner.

"You do not mean that you've found out anything, Gran?" exclaimed her granddaughter, excitedly. "They're always asking me about the Hall when I go down to the village; and they've got hold of some queer stories about the family, I can tell you. It's only twice in the whole six months they've been here that

Mr. Langley has been outside the gates. Mrs. Bond, of the post-office, told me that not a single invitation have they accepted, though all the best families round have asked them to their houses, and—"

"Mrs. Bond is a sight too fond of talking!" interrupted the grandmother. "I'll have to stop your going to the village, if you waste your time listening to such idle gossip as that."

"But, granny, you owned that you knew something yourself."

"Ay, ay; I could speak if I would, no fear. A likely thing, though, that I'd be telling all I know to a giddy young thing like you! Why, it would be in every one's mouth before the end of the week!"

"No, indeed, Gran, not if I promise. I can keep a secret as well as any one."

"And you'll never go and chat about it?"

"No, never; as sure as I am here."

"Well, let me see. 'Twas yesterday evening, just about this time, I was standing by the garden-gate— But there, I ought not to speak, after all, for it wasn't meant for my ears. Least said's soonest mended."

"Indeed, Granny, but you must speak now; you said you would if I'd promise not to tell," Bess said, coaxingly. "You were standing by the garden-gate, you said."

"Yes," went on the old woman slowly, "by the garden-gate, when who should come walking down the foot-path which runs by the drive but the master, his eyes on the ground, as usual, and his arms folded over his chest. I made so bold as to wish him good-evening; and he came close up to the railings, and stood speaking to me a while about my roses. They're as fine as any up at the Hall; and he couldn't but own as much, though I says it as shouldn't."

"Yes—yes, I know all that, Gran! But go on. I don't see what the roses has got to do with it."

"Then I do, my girl, for if it hadn't been for the roses he wouldn't have stopped. I don't know where I was, with you interrupting me like that!"

"You'd got no further than the garden-gate," Bess said slyly.

"Ah, to be sure! and the master was speaking to me about my roses. But I could see it wasn't of them he was thinking at all; and small blame to him too, for the carriage had but just gone down to fetch the doctor. No doubt he'd walked as far as the lodge to wait for it to come back, being too nervous like to stop in the house. You see, nobody ever thought that the mistress would have been taken ill so soon, and they were all in a fine flurry up at the Hall."

"Well, I'd heard that from Mary Brown, who'd been sewing there; so I says to him that



I hoped all would go well with his lady, and that before morning dawned he might be father to a fine son and heir.

"No sooner were the words out of my mouth than I saw I'd said something as I'd better have left unsaid, for he turned just as white as white could be; and a great groan came from him, for all the world as if he was in some mighty pain. Then, when he saw me look frightened—as well I might—he tried to smile, and said as 'twas nothing—only a sudden spasm, as took him sometimes. I might have thought he was speaking the truth if I'd heard no more; but that wasn't all.

"Just then the carriage came dashing up, and I took a step or two forward before I saw you'd gone already to open the gates. I stayed where I was, and turned to look at the master. He was standing with his two arms stretched upward, his head thrown back, and his eyes cast up at the sky, with a look in them I shall never forget to my dying day.

"Oh, Bess! talk of rich folks being happy, and having all they want! That wretched look of misery on his white face told something different to all that! You see, he thought I'd left him, and he was alone. It seemed like as if the words were forced from him.

"'Oh, Heaven!' he cried, and his voice was deep and shaking; 'if my poor child lives, have mercy on it! Let not the awful curse fall upon its innocent head! mine was the sin; let mine alone be the punishment!'

"There! these was his very words! They've been ringing in my ears ever since. I can't, somehow, get them out of my head."

"My goodness, Gran! it sounds awful! Whatever can he have done, and who can have cursed him? I'd give something to get at the bottom of it all. I—I wonder if Mr. Dexter knows. He's known the master all his life. They were boys together; he told me so.

"He told you so, did he?" inquired her grandmother, sharply. "I thought he was a great deal too proud and stuck-up to talk to the likes of us. There's the difference between true gentlefolks and those that are not. One would think, to see Abel Dexter, with his fine clothes and his diamond ring, and to hear the way he speaks, that he was the master, instead of only a servant."

"A servant, indeed, Gran! He isn't that, I'm sure. He's the secretary, so there!"

The girl's cheeks flushed, and she spoke defiantly and with unnecessary warmth.

"Secretary, he calls himself, does he?" retorted the old woman, angrily. "Then who's the valet, I'd like to know? It's he who waits on the master; none else. And it's the first time that ever I heard of the secretary doing valet's work.

"My husband was ten years coachman in

the old squire's family, so I should know something of servant's duties! Secretary, indeed! Valet's not fine sounding enough for him, I suppose! If I was the master I'd just pack him out of the house—him and his old mother, bag and baggage! They'll find it hard work to get a decent servant to stop at the hall so long as she's housekeeper! Bah! I hate the very sight of the couple of them!

"'Twas but yesterday, as I was telling you, that I went up to the house, thinking that I might be of use, for I'd heard there was no nurse come. I was shown into Mrs. Dexter's own room—just as fine as any lady's drawing-room, if you please. She never so much as asked me to be seated; but looks down at me as I might be the dirt beneath her feet.

"'I shall attend on Mrs. Langley myself,' says she, as proud and haughty as a queen. 'If we'd wanted other help we should have sent to the city, but Mrs. Langley has a great dislike to strangers.'

"So that was all I got for my pains! Then she sends an impudent hussy of a servant to the door with me, as if she thought I might lay ~~my~~ hands on something if I wasn't watched. I never thought that the time would ever come when I should be hustled out of the house like that. And to think of the times, many and oft, that my dear lady that's gone has had me into her own parlor and poured me out a glass of wine with her own hands! Ah, well! those days are gone, and they'll never come back again—more's the pity! The world's all wrong somehow nowadays; or, maybe, I've grown too old for it!"

She shook her head dolefully, and passed her hand wearily across her brow.

It was not often that Bess suffered her grandmother to ramble on so long without an interruption. The old woman, wondering at her unusual silence, looked up presently, and found that the little kitchen had no other occupant than herself. Bess's quick ear had caught the sound of wheels on the road outside, and she had hastened out to open the gates.

"The doctor again!" murmured the girl to herself, as she stepped aside and stood when it had passed, with one hand shading her eyes looking after the carriage, which was being driven rapidly toward the house. "It's not two hours since he was here; I wonder if anything's amiss."

She remained for several minutes in the same position, her pretty brows puckered into a thoughtful frown, her red lips pressed tightly together.

The Hall possessed a new interest for her after what her grandmother had said. She was already burning with curiosity respecting the mysterious words which Mr. Langley had used. To her ignorant and superstitious mind,



there was something positively fascinating in the very word "curse."

Only two days ago Mrs. Bond had said, "I wonder, Bess, you know so little about the family, living as you do under their very noses so to say."

This remark recurred to her now.

"I'll have to find it all out one of these days," she decided.

It would be hard if, with such chances as she had, she could not manage to discover something of what went on at the old house.

Before her the long white drive wound in and out beneath two somber rows of giant evergreens, and beyond, on a grassy terrace, rose the massive red-brick building, its windows gleaming with a lurid light from between the twisted branches as they reflected the rays of the setting sun.

In Bess's vivid imagination, it seemed almost as if the Hall were ablaze, burning and glowing with some awful and supernatural fire that gave forth neither sound nor smoke.

"Granny," she said to the old woman, who just then appeared in the doorway, "the house looks strange this evening, doesn't it?"

"Tut, tut, girl!—what have you got in your head now? There's nothing different to what I've seen almost every evening at sunset. Your brains are wool-gathering, my lass. Come, don't stand there idling; it's time the supper was made ready. Why, I declare, here's Will Bates! What's he been doing up at the Hall, I wonder? This is an odd time to be having carpentering done."

"Good-evening to you, Will. You've been working late, I see. Step in and rest a little, my lad, and have a bite of supper with us."

"Yes, do, Will," put in Bess, pleasantly. "There's only bread and cheese; but such as it is, you're welcome."

She led the way into the lodge without waiting for his reply, knowing well enough that he could not withstand the smile with which her words were accompanied.

Poor Will blushed with pleasure at her unusually gracious manner. Only too glad of the chance of half an hour's chat, he unslung his basket of tools from his shoulder and entered the kitchen.

"I suppose it's not inside the house you've been working, is it, Will?" the girl began, cautiously, when, a few minutes later, they were all seated before the round table on which the simple supper had been laid. "They'd hardly like your hammering just now, I fancy."

"So I should have thought too," the young man replied, slowly. "I asked Mr. Dexter if the job hadn't better wait over a little, for I couldn't do the work he wanted without some noise, and I knew the lady was ill."

"Then you was in the house?" queried the old woman, no whit less curious than her granddaughter.

"Yes, Mrs. Pearson; I've been putting a new lock to a door in one of the rooms of the east wing; the old one had been wrenched clean off. I can't think how it could be done; it was broken right off, and some of the wood-work along with it."

"I cannot understand why they should be in such a hurry to have it mended," Bess remarked, thoughtfully. "The east wing was hardly ever used in the old Squire's time; it's so old—and damp too, they say. I remember two years ago, when the house was full of company, and I had gone to help in the kitchen, they put me to sleep there one night, for I'd stayed late. I'd never have stopped, only I didn't like to go back then and wake up grandmother. You see, I've always had a dread of that part of the house—it's so lonely. Nay, they say it's haunted, too, only I didn't know that then. Such a dismal sort of a room they put me in! One at the very end of the long corridor."

"That must have been the same room where I was working," Will interposed; "only I couldn't see inside of it, for the baize inner door was closed all the while."

"The baize door!" cried the girl, excitedly; "there was no baize door when I was there. D'you mean to say there are two doors?"

"To be sure. There is nothing very strange in that, Bess; it's common enough to have two doors. If people don't want to hear the noise of the house, or are afraid of draughts, there's nothing better."

But Bess was not to be satisfied with any such simple explanation. She felt certain that there must be some sinister motive in those two doors, on the outer one of which so strong a lock was required. Her curiosity was raised to such a pitch, that for hours that night she felt too excited to retire to rest, and sat, instead, before the small window in her room, unable to withdraw her eyes from the Hall, which looked more weird than ever in the ghostly, uncertain moonlight.

## CHAPTER II.

### A BATTLE FOUGHT AND WON.

"WILL it live, doctor?"

The speaker, but little more than a child herself, partly raised her head, with its wealth of dark silky curls, from the frilled pillow, and eagerly, almost wildly, gazed into the doctor's face as he parted the delicate lace curtains of a swan-shaped cot at the further end of the room, and bent with grave solicitude over its tiny occupant.



"Live?—yes, I trust so."

There was more severity than hopefulness in his voice; and his face, usually so kind and sympathetic, assumed its very sternest aspect. He let the filmy curtains fall back to their place, and, crossing the room, sat down near the bed.

"Mrs. Langley, I will not disguise from you the real facts of the case. I told you this morning how very important it was that you should nurse your baby yourself."

He paused for a moment, apparently to listen to the feeble wailing which came from the child, but in reality to give his patient time to recover herself; for his practiced eye had been quick to detect the feverish flush which rushed to her face, and the half-frightened, half-pleading look which came into the soft brown eyes.

"I thought, as I say, that it was important this morning; this evening I consider it to be absolutely necessary, if you would save your child's life."

She made no reply, but raising her two small white hands, covered her face with them.

He fancied she was wavering—deliberating; and to add force to his words, he fetched the baby and laid it gently by her side, thinking the sight of it would speak more eloquently than he could.

She did not discover what he had done, till a slight cry close to her made her start and look down at it.

There was no doubting the expression in her eyes then. They distended unnaturally with a look of horror and aversion, while the flush that had been on her cheeks a moment before, faded away, leaving them of a wax-like pallor.

"Take it away!" she cried, scarcely above a whisper, her voice dry and hoarse, though each word was terribly distinct. "Take it away! I—I cannot look at it!"

The good doctor hastened to comply with her request. To tell the truth, he was not a little startled. Mrs. Langley was nervous and excitable—he knew that; but there was something more in all this than mere nervousness and excitability. In all the course of his experience he had never had so difficult a case to deal with. This was the first time, thank Heaven—and he hoped it might be the last—that he had ever seen such a look on the face of any mother at such a time.

Horrible as the idea was, it seemed that Mrs. Langley was actually seized with a positive aversion to her own child.

Replacing the baby in its cradle, he went to the window, and stood there looking out, with his hands clasped behind his back, not knowing exactly what to do next.

There was silence in the room for nearly five minutes; then a voice came from the bed—a pleading voice now, plaintive and patient.

"Doctor—Doctor Mellor! Please don't be very angry with me!"

He went to her at once, and smiled down at her reassuringly.

The fawn-like eyes were full of tears, the baby mouth quivering with emotion. After all, she was such a child, it was impossible to be angry with her. He took the small hand so shyly extended to him, and resumed his seat by the bed.

"It is such a pity, my dear,"—the word escaped him unconsciously—"such a great pity that you excite yourself in this way."

"I—I can't help it, doctor; I can't, indeed!" she replied, with an hysterical little sob.

"Well, well, never mind that now." He patted the trembling fingers softly. "I do wish you had some relation—some lady friend who could come and talk to you instead of me. I am a rough old fellow, I know, and I don't say things always as I ought; still, you must know that when I urge a thing as I urge this, it is because I believe—because I know it is to be for the best."

"Yes, I know," she sighed, wearily; but still she showed no sign of relenting.

"How do you like your nurse?" he inquired, abruptly.

She glanced nervously round the room before replying, and her voice lowered.

"Pretty well—that is, not very much. I think. She is the housekeeper, you know, but she understands nursing very well."

"Ah, yes, I dare say," Doctor Mellor said, doubtfully; "still, I should have preferred a regular nurse. It is not too late for me to have one down from the city now if you wish it."

"Oh, no; please do not suggest such a thing," she hastened to say. "Mrs. Dexter would not like it."

"As you please, of course," rejoined the doctor; "but I think your recovery would be more rapid with a more experienced person."

She looked a little blank at this, and he was quick to seize his advantage.

"It has just occurred to me that you might perhaps like my wife to come and see you sometimes. She has had a large family of her own, so should know something of these matters; and she is so bright and cheerful— But, bless my soul! here am I forgetting all my other patients. I must be off at once."

Before she had time to raise any objections—before she could say one word even against his proposition—he had left the room, with a hurried "Good-evening to you," and was halfway down the stairs, chuckling to himself contentedly over this clever diplomatic move.

"If any one can bring her to her senses and get her to do what is right, it is Mary," he thought.



Doctor Mellor had unbounded faith in his wife, and that faith seldom proved to be misplaced.

"So he's gone at last, is he?" said Mrs. Dexter, coming into the room with that noiseless, cat-like step which some people persist in adopting in a sick-room, and which is so irritating to an invalid. "He thought he would be able to talk you over if he saw you alone, I dare say. A likely thing! Did he think I had been persuading you not to nurse the child, I wonder? Really, I should like to know what is going to happen next!"

"You did say the baby would get on very well with the bottle," Mrs. Langley ventured to say.

"And so it would, too; it's only Doctor Mellor's old-fashioned notions. Lor', I've seen children twice as weak and sickly-looking as this grow to be fine and hearty on the bottle; you will see how it will thrive, and—"

"Hush! Oh, please, hush!" cried the poor little mother, closing her eyes and turning her face restlessly on the pillow, while great tears began to force their way, one by one, through the long, dusky lashes. "If only I could have died—I and baby! If only we could have died!"

"And, indeed, it would be a mercy if the child was taken, at any rate," said Mrs. Dexter, in no way moved by the infinite pathos of the words, wrung as they were out of her very misery.

"You have no right to say that," Mrs. Langley rejoined, excitedly, hardly knowing what it was she said. "How dare you say it would be a mercy if my child were to die? Oh, baby, baby, how proud I thought I should have been of you! How happy I was, making your tiny clothes! How I used to think of you and dream of you, and never, never tire of thinking of you! And now—and now—"

Her voice was choked with sobs; she could say no more.

Mrs. Dexter was not utterly heartless; she did what she could to soothe her mistress. She held a cooling draught to her lips, and smoothed away the damp lock of hair from the tear-stained cheeks.

Before long the poor girl, quite worn out and exhausted, fell into a heavy, dreamless sleep, from which she did not awaken for nearly an hour.

When at length she awoke she did not immediately open her eyes. Mrs. Dexter would be worrying her to take something perhaps, as soon as she knew she no longer slept. So she lay there with eyes closed yet a little longer.

Gradually she became aware that there was a scent of reses in the air, and that a soft, cooling breeze was being wafted across her face. How refreshing it was! She could almost fancy she was in her favorite seat by the oriel window of her own boudoir, with the

great creamy Gloire-de-Dijon roses climbing round the carved stone framework near her and nodding their dewy heads in the balmy summer breeze.

The white lids lifted languidly only a little way. From beneath the partly-lowered lashes she could see the little table which stood beside the bed. The roses were there in a vase of water, and near them were some green and purple grapes.

Who had placed them there? Not Mrs. Dexter, surely; she was not given to such little attentions. Had Marmaduke, her husband, brought them while she slept?

The thought brought the color to her cheeks, and a deep sigh escaped her, while at the same time she looked up and met the glance of a pair of kindly gray eyes.

A lady was seated near her; not with her bonnet and shawl on; Mrs. Mellor knew better than that. She wore a gown of some soft gray material, with a white handkerchief crossed over her chest; her silvery hair was smoothed away beneath a snowy cap. She looked as much at home as if she had been there for a week. A piece of work of some kind was on her lap; but just now she was not sewing, for she held a large fan in one hand, with which she gently fanned the invalid.

"You have had a nice sleep, my dear. It has done you good, I see," she said, with a smile.

Such a soft, sweet smile! A feeling of peacefulness and security stole over Mrs. Langley as her eyes rested on the kind, sympathetic face.

"Who are you?" she asked, wonderingly, putting out her hand and letting her fingers touch those of the lady, as if she hardly believed in her reality. "How is it Mrs. Dexter let you come to me?"

"I don't think there was any question of 'letting,' my dear. My husband sent me to sit with you for an hour or so, and doctors' orders must be obeyed, you know."

"Ah, yes! And you are Mrs. Mellor. I remember it all now. But where is Mrs. Dexter?"

The nervous look returned once more, and she glanced around anxiously.

"I asked her to see that some beef tea was got ready for you by the time you awoke. She has but just left the room. Shall I call her?"

"Oh, no; please do not."

Mrs. Langley's fingers closed spasmodically over the hand. She seemed to have a strange dread of being left alone.

"Who was it brought the fruit and flowers?" she asked next. "Was it you?"

"Indeed, no," Mrs. Mellor replied. "We have none half so fine. It was your husband. He—"

"Did he come in—in this room, I mean?"



She strove to speak calmly, but it was with difficulty she could command her voice.

"No, he would not, though I wanted him to come and see you while you slept. He said he would rather wait until you asked for him. He just put the fruit and flowers into my hands, and then went away; but he gave such a wistful look at the room, I am sure he found it hard to refuse. After you have taken your beef tea and I have brushed your hair, you will let him come, will you not?"

"Must I—I—I mean, yes, I suppose so; but not just yet. By and by perhaps."

Mrs. Mellor feigned not to notice her agitation, though she wondered a little at her strange manner.

Mrs. Dexter came into the room soon after, not in the best of tempers, as could be seen by her tightly-compressed lips.

She was pushing rudely past the doctor's wife, when, to her surprise and mortification, that lady, with a quiet dignity, took the tray from her hands and proceeded to give Mrs. Langley the beef-tea herself.

"It seems I'm not wanted here," she said, impudently, with a toss of her head, not even attempting to disguise her annoyance. "Yet I did think I was quite capable of attending on Mrs. Langley without any other help."

Mrs. Mellor was astounded at the woman's cool effrontery. How could Mr. Langley suffer such a person to remain near his wife? All she said, however, was: "I am here by my husband's express desire."

"I suppose he thought you would be able to persuade her to nurse the child? You won't find it such an easy matter."

"Was it really only for that you came?" Mrs. Langley asked, reproachfully.

"My dear, it is true that was one of my reasons; but I should have come anyway as soon as I heard that you were alone."

The poor girl gave her a grateful smile. It was so true that she was alone—more terribly alone than her new friend could imagine; yet she feared to accept the friendship so freely offered, and for which she so longed.

For some time Mrs. Mellor sat beside her, talking pleasantly of anything she thought might amuse or interest her; of little bits of harmless gossip in the neighborhood; of her own sons and daughters, most of them married now and living at a distance; then, gradually, when Mrs. Dexter had left them to go and have her supper, she approached the all-important subject.

"Tell me, my child, what the objection is which you have to nursing your baby. Perhaps I may be able to overcome it."

"I cannot explain; you would not understand. I—I think I am afraid of it!" she added, with an hysterical little laugh which almost ended in a sob.

"Afraid of your own child! That cannot be. You are nervous, that is all. Such a pretty little thing as it is too! with eyes just like her father. Ah! you will be very proud of her when she is a little older."

"Eyes like Marmaduke, did you say?" cried the mother, in sudden and unaccountable alarm. "Then it is true! I fancied so myself."

Mrs. Mellor, though she was at a loss to understand the meaning of it, saw that the allusion to the father had not been a happy one, so she hastened to change the subject.

"I think you know Mrs. Brereton?" she said next. "She lives at the Grange, not far from here."

"Very slightly," Mrs. Langley replied, only too glad to talk of anything else. "She and the colonel called upon me, and I returned the call; that is all I have seen of them. She looked ill and unhappy, I fancied."

"Yet she is not really ill—in body, at least; but she has a secret sorrow which preys upon her mind. I should like to tell you about it if you will let me."

"Six years ago she had a little son. Like you, she was greatly averse to nursing him herself. She was a beautiful woman then, though you would hardly think it to see her now, and very fond of society. She was unwilling to deny herself any pleasure even for her child's sake. My husband said all he could to persuade her, but in vain. She fancied he exaggerated when he told her the boy's life depended upon it, and would listen to neither him nor her husband."

"My dear, she was terribly punished. The poor baby grew weaker and more feeble every day. When it was too late, she would have given all she had to save him. Day after day she would sit with the child on her lap, her tearless eyes fixed, with an expression of hopeless agony, on the little wasted face. Ah, how she must have hated those foolish vanities and pleasures for which she had sacrificed him! To make her misery the greater, she had to endure her husband's well-merited, though silent reproach. He never accused her in words, but there was something in his very silence which must have been doubly hard for her to bear."

"Well, the end came all too soon. They thought she would have gone mad when the child died, and in their fright they sent for me. It was dreadful to hear her self-accusations and to be able to offer her no consolation. I went up to her, and endeavored to take her in my arms, but she put out her hands, as if to keep me from her, crying out wildly, 'Do not touch me! You would not if you knew! I am a murderess; I have killed my own child!'"

"Oh, my dear, if you had heard her then; if you could know what her life has been since,



you would not hesitate now to do what is right.

"The colonel is a just and good man. I do not think he has spoken one unkind word to her; indeed, I think he has been more considerate to her, if possible, since; but there is a difference. He has never been quite the same. You see, he was so anxious for an heir—so proud when the boy was born; and they have had no other children."

She drew a deep sigh when she concluded; then, taking up her work, went quietly on with her sewing.

Mrs. Langley was silently weeping. There was no word spoken by either of them for some minutes. The poor girl was evidently fighting a hard battle with herself.

By and by she raised her face, all woe-begone and tear-stained, a pitiful little smile trembling on her lips.

Mrs. Mellor rose, and stooping, kissed her. She understood what it meant, and knew that she had conquered.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE SECRET OF THE EAST WING.

THE Normanton estate, though not large, was one of the most beautiful and picturesque properties in the whole country. There was no more romantic spot for miles around than that portion of the grounds through which the river wound its course. A plantation of beeches grew on the sloping banks, and close to the edge weeping willows arched their slender branches, and at every breath of wind swept the shining surface of the water with their pale green boughs.

In spring the ground was covered with violets and wood anemones; a little later the wild hyacinths spread like a vast blue carpet beneath the trees. But now summer was already far advanced; violets, anemones and blue-bells had all in turn disappeared, and in their place feathery ferns grew thickly everywhere in luxuriant profusion, only interspersed here and there by buttercups and daisies.

Among these same ferns, half sitting, half reclining, was Bess Pearson, the lodge-keeper's granddaughter. She had taken off her hat, for the afternoon was warm, and the little flecks of sunlight came trembling through the gently stirring branches of the beeches upon her uncovered head, making her chestnut hair glint like red gold.

She was a pretty girl—very pretty, as she lay back there against the green fern fronds, with the broken light and shade resting on her; but a look of discontent clouded her face, and the rosy lips were pouting. Her dress was but of coarse blue-and-white-striped calico, and the edges of it were frayed and soiled; there were two or three rents in the skirt, too, which

she had not attempted to mend—Bess hated needlework.

The girl's natural vanity and love of finery were apparent in the bunch of scarlet poppies fastened at her neck, and the string of mock coral beads which encircled the full and shapely throat.

A pace or two from her stood Abel Dexter, leaning carelessly against a tree, smoking a cigar.

He was a tall, powerful-looking man, of some thirty-five years of age, with a dark, sallow complexion, and hair and eyes black as ink. At a first glance, one might have taken him for a gentleman. He had an easy grace of movement, a somewhat haughty carriage of the head, a certain air of refinement which one seldom sees in one of the lower orders. A closer observer, however, would soon have detected that his appearance alone was in his favor, for every word and action displayed his indomitable pride and insolence. He acknowledged no superiors, while to those whom he considered his inferiors he was overbearing and exacting in the extreme.

Such being his character, it was not a little surprising that he should consent to hold the equivocal position which he did at Normanton Hall.

Doubtless, though, Abel had his own reasons for remaining in Mr. Langley's household. It is certain that both he and his mother had no very bad time of it there, and the remuneration which they received for their very meager services must have been decidedly handsome, to judge by the way Mrs. Dexter dressed, and by the ample means which her son always seemed to have at his disposal.

Poor, ignorant Bess thought herself a very lucky girl when she succeeded in attracting his attention, and it is doubtful whether half the girls in the village would not have envied her had they known that he had actually consented to fall in love with her, and to tell her so, too.

But at least half the pleasure of her triumph was spoiled by the fact that they did not know, for he had strictly forbidden her to speak to any one of their meetings.

It was this very subject which they had been discussing to-day, and which had brought such a discontented expression to the pretty face.

"I'm sure I can't see why you shouldn't let me tell folks that we're to be married one of these days," she said, fretfully.

"I don't suppose you can, my dear; you must allow me to be the best judge of that."

He regarded her critically as he spoke, thinking the heightened color brought to her cheeks by that slight ebullition of temper rather becoming than otherwise. He was speculating on how she would look in a passion; he could just imagine how those dark eyes of hers would



blaze and flash; there was a want of animation about her usually.

"Sometimes I wonder, Abel, if you ain't making a fool of me after all," she said, with a pettish impatience, watching him askance the while from under her long lashes. "If you mean true, what's to prevent you making me your wife at once? You're rich enough. It does seem so hard that I should have to go on living at the lodge with Granny, and wearing these shabby clothes, when you're looking just like a gentleman. She looked very much inclined to cry as she concluded.

With a half smile, he flung himself down on the ferns beside her, and put one arm round her waist.

"Now, Bess, you are unreasonable. Do you think if I could do what I liked that I wouldn't marry you to-morrow?"

"I don't know," she rejoined, averting her head, and turning partly away from him. "I know well enough that I'm not half good enough for you. There's Jane Bond would give her eyes for you, and Nellie James, too; and they do say she'll have a fortune. How do I know but you'll get to like one of them in time, and—and where will I be then? There, I think, for I'd never try to live without you!"

She pointed to the sluggish river, flowing silently before them. But for a broken twig or a fallen leaf or two floating on its surface, one might have thought the water stationary.

He took the outstretched hand in his, and drawing her to him, passionately kissed the full, pouting lips and tear-dimmed eyes.

"You little darling! Don't you know it's you I love, and no one else? Listen to me; I will tell you why I don't want us to get married for a year or two if it can possibly be avoided. You say I am rich enough. Well, maybe I am; but I'm not as rich as I mean to be by a long way. I mean that my wife"—the word made Bess smile proudly, and rest her head lovingly on his arm—"shall ride in her carriage. There! what do you say to that?—ride in her carriage and wear silks and satins every day of her life, if she likes!"

"Do you mean it really, Abel—really and truly?" the girl asked, a flush of pleasure and excitement rushing over her face, and her eyes sparkling with animation. "And will I wear rings and jewels, and lace and feathers, just like a lady? Oh, Abel! it seems it's all too good to be true! How I've longed, and longed, and prayed for these things! And now only to think that one day it'll all come true!"

"And it's worth waiting a bit for Bess, isn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose it is," she replied, somewhat dubiously, not quite so sure of this. "Abel," she began again, after a slight pause, "I'd like

to know where all this money is coming from?"

He frowned at her words, and the arm which still encircled her waist was withdrawn.

"You are always wanting to know something, Bess. Why can't you be content to trust me without asking questions?"

"I thought, when folks were in love, they always told each other everything?" she rejoined. "I'm sure I tell you everything I know!"

"Well, so do I—that is everything that is right you should know!"

"No, you don't, Abel; you never tell me anything—not even what goes on at the Hall!"

"What goes on at the Hall?" he exclaimed, in unfeigned surprise. "Why, how could anything that takes place there possibly interest you?"

"Oh, I know more about it than you think!" she went on, nodding her head, with an assumption of sagacity and wisdom. "Folks will talk, you know."

"Oh, folks talk, do they? They had better be minding their own business, I think!"

There was an ominous scowl upon his handsome face, and his nostrils dilated like those of an angry animal. Bess was not looking at him or she would hardly have continued her taunting, jesting tone.

"You see, as you won't tell me anything, I just have to find out for myself, Abel. Oh, yes; you think I know nothing about the room with the double doors, and the strong lock that had to be put on in such a hurry!"

"What!"

He turned on her savagely, his face close to hers, and grasped her arm with such force that she cried out in sudden pain and alarm.

Her frightened face recalled him to himself. With a nervous laugh, he relaxed his hold.

Bess, white and trembling, had risen to her feet. He saw he would have some difficulty in reassuring her.

"What a cursed fool I am," he thought, "to betray myself like that! Of course, it was that idiot of a carpenter who spoke about mending the lock! I might have guessed it was impossible she could really know anything."

Meanwhile, he exerted himself to his utmost to make friends again—no difficult matter, after all.

"And now I must tell you, I suppose, why I was so angry," he said, when he had seen the color return once more to her cheeks. "The fact is, Mr. Langley would be awfully wild if he thought I had told you the secret of that room."

"Then there is a secret?" she exclaimed, breathlessly.

"Yes; but it's not such a grand secret,



after all. You will laugh when you hear what it is. Mr. Langley has got a couple of foreign birds caged up there — great wild things they are, standing nearly as high as we do."

"But why does he keep them there? Won't they die, being shut up like that?" Bess asked, her eyes opening with astonishment.

"No; they are owls, you see — at least, something like owls, so they never want to go out in the daytime. We let them out now and again at night, and they make a fine noise then, I can tell you."

"But why should Mr. Langley make a secret of it, Abel?"

"Oh, because"—he hesitated a moment, at a loss what to say—only a moment, but it was a moment of enlightenment to Bess—"because if it came to the ears of the people who keep the Zoological Gardens in Philadelphia that there were two such valuable birds here at Normantown, they'd be wanting to have them; and Mr. Langley is very proud of them, and would be sorry to lose them. You will have to take care you say nothing about this to any one. If you do I'll never tell you anything again—remember that."

"Oh, I'll be sure not to tell a living soul!" the girl said confidently.

But when they had parted, and Bess was making her way home to the lodge along the little path which led through the wood, she gave a little exultant laugh to herself.

"I may be a fool," she thought, "but I'm not quite such a fool as he takes me for. A likely thing that I'm going to believe that about the foreign birds! Birds, indeed!—it's my opinion there's some one locked up in that room—some one as Mr. Langley keeps a prisoner. I don't know as it makes much odds where the money comes from, so long as we get it. To think that I'll be a lady one day!"

She stood for awhile, her head thrown back, her lithe young figure drawn up proudly, a smile of rapture on her lips, and her hands clasped together in ecstasy.

"And Abel shall never repent having chosen me; he shall see I'll look the lady, too. Folks will be seeing a grand carriage go by, ever so fast, with big black horses and silver—real silver—on the harness; and there'll be a beautiful lady inside, all in white, with a pink parasol, like Mrs. Langley's; and she'll lean back against the cushions, all easy and careless-like, as if she'd been used to it all her life; and she'll smile, ever so slightly, and bow like this." Bess, carried away by her own thoughts, suited the action to the word.

"And every one will say, 'Who is she? Who can she be?' And all the time it'll be me—Bess!"

Once more she laughed outright, and clapped her hands in delight.

"You seem to be very merry," some one said close behind her.

At the words she started and looked round sharply. Had she been speaking those words aloud? She could not remember. The face of the stranger reassured her; she showed no consciousness of having overheard.

She was a lady, young and handsome, with clear blue eyes and fair golden hair cut short and curling like a boy's. In that one swift glance Bess took in everything—the plain blue linen dress, trimmed with embroidery to match, the simple straw hat with its bouquet of field flowers, and the sunshade guiltless of ornament.

"When I'm a lady," she thought, contemptuously, "I'll dress better than that."

"Can you tell me if this is the way to Normanton Hall?" the stranger asked, regarding her with rather an amused expression in her bright eyes.

"Yes, you'll get to it in this way if you walk straight on." She would have said "miss" a few weeks ago, but lately Bess had taken to dropping such little marks of civility. "The path will take you out of the wood and into the drive itself. You will see the house plainly from there."

With a brief "Thank you," the lady passed on.

Bess stood looking after her curiously.

"Now, I'd like to know who she is," she said to herself. "I don't believe that I've seen her about here before. And why does she come through the wood instead of by the road? Ah, I have it. She's stopping at The Grange, I suppose, with Mrs. Brereton, and she's crossed the river in the boat. The colonel and his wife used to come that way, I remember, in the old Squire's time. If she's a friend of Mrs. Langley's, she's the first ever I've seen since they've been here. I doubt whether she'll be made welcome. There's not a soul's been at the house but Mrs. Mellor, the doctor's wife, since the baby was born, and that's nearly a month ago."

She left the wood soon, and came out on the broad, white carriage drive, where she paused once more.

"Ay, there she goes," she murmured, "through the last gate and across the lawn. Now she's by the door. I wonder will they let her in? Yes, there's the door open, and she's gone in. I'll ask Abel about her to-morrow; not that I'm likely to get much out of him, though."

Just then the big clock over the Hall stables struck five.

"My word! who ever'd have thought 'twas so late?" cried Bess, in consternation, "Gran-



ny'll be angry with me for being off most all the afternoon like this."

She turned her back upon the Hall, and set off running as fast as she could in the direction of the lodge.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### A FATAL STEP.

MRS. LANGLEY had not been at all strong since her baby was born, though she had for some days insisted that she was well enough, and had left her room and come down stairs as usual.

She looked terribly pale and thin. There were deep hollows in the once rounded cheeks; and the dark eyes, unnaturally large now, had a wistful, startled look in them that was inexpressibly painful to see.

Doctor Mellor was puzzled, and did not know what to make of her. Many a long talk did he and his good old wife have about her.

"She would be so much better if only we could get her away from this place," he said. "You succeeded so well before, Mary; don't you think you could persuade her to go to the sea side for a couple of months? I can't get her to listen to me."

Of course Mrs. Mellor promised to do her best, and the very next day she went to the Hall and broached the subject; but this time she was not successful.

Mrs. Langley listened to all she had to say with that listless apathy which was becoming so natural to her, then refused firmly and decidedly to leave Normanton even for a week.

So Mrs. Mellor took her leave, and started back for the village, feeling sad and dispirited, for she had taken a great fancy to her husband's patient, and it pained and grieved her inexpressibly to see the poor girl fading away, as it were, before their very eyes.

Not far from the house she came upon Mr. Langley, walking slowly up and down the drive. His head was bent, his eyes on the ground.

His wife had seemed unhappy enough; but there was a set look of misery and despair on his face that made the old lady long to stop and say something to comfort him.

But he never saw her—never once raised his head, only walked on mechanically, like a man walking in his sleep.

"What is it that is wrong with them?" she asked herself, almost impatiently, as she passed on. "I dare say it is nothing more or less than some foolish quarrel they have had, and each is too proud to be the first to own to being in the wrong. Oh, it makes me angry to think that two young people should spoil their lives in this way!"

But there was more sorrow than anger in

her thoughts just then, and tears were glistening in her eyes.

No sooner did Mrs. Langley find herself alone than she sunk down on the nearest couch, and burying her face in the pillows, burst into a passionate flood of tears.

"Oh, why can't they let me alone!" she sobbed. "Why will they tempt me to leave this hateful place? Cannot they see how I am longing to go—how the thought that I must stay here is killing me?"

She endeavored to rise, and clasped her hands together tightly over her heart.

"The very air of this house stifles me. I seem to draw in poison at every breath. What have I done—oh, what have I done that I should be chosen for such a lot as this?"

Half-fainting, she fell back upon the pillow, where she lay for some time motionless, her face white as death, her eyes closed.

Had she really fainted, or was it only sleep that was stealing over her? She neither knew nor cared. Either was equally welcome to her then, for it brought with it a sense of rest and peace, a delicious unconsciousness, gradually numbing her faculties and lifting her, as it were, out of herself.

One by one, scenes from her past life floated before her as in a dream.

She was little May Sandford again, a happy, merry, light-hearted child, seated in the swing beneath the big pear-tree in Uncle Gregory's old-fashioned garden. What a dear old garden that was, with its high, close-clipped box hedges and many winding paths, its sweet-swalling cabbage roses and mignonette, and its borders of five o'clocks. As she swung to and fro, the soft breeze, laden with the scent of many flowers, met her, and lightly lifted the curls from her brow. When she went back she was almost hidden by the leaves of the pear-tree; when she flew forward again she could look straight over the box hedges at the houses beyond. Ah, yes, and there was old Patience, in her snow-white cap and apron, standing in the doorway beneath the honeysuckle covered porch! She was waving to her to come in. It must be six o'clock. Uncle Gregory would be waiting for her to pour out his tea.

Then that scene passed, and another appeared.

It was the same house, but she was no longer quite a child. The old pear-tree was leafless; the garden was covered with a smooth white shroud of snow; and a few naked stalks among the trellis-work of the porch were all that remained of the honeysuckle, for the summer had long since passed, and winter was come. Everything looked very, very dismal to May now, for it had been decided that she must go to school. Before the door a carriage was



standing, with her trunks on the top. She was in the hall, with her arms clasped tightly round Uncle Gregory's neck, begging him, with tears streaming down her cheeks, not to send her from him. She could hear his voice now as he answered her. It trembled a little, and there was a suspicious moisture in his own eyes.

"My dear, you speak as if we were parting forever. What are six months, after all! They will soon pass, and you will be home again."

And that was the last time she saw him; yet Uncle Gregory was not dead. It was a fate crueller than death which parted them.

The six months passed, and she was not going home, for Uncle Gregory was abroad, and had written a letter full of regret and sympathy; but the bitter truth was there, clothed in tender, loving words. She was to spend the holidays in school.

She was in the shabby, ill-furnished school-room, standing disconsolately by the window, looking over the wire-blind at her more fortunate school-fellows as, one by one, with laughing eyes and happy faces, they took their departure.

What a real trouble that seemed to her, and how wretched she felt at the thought that she would be the only one left! But the door was flung open, and her dear, true friend, Kate Dunstable, came rushing in, waving a letter triumphantly in her hand. It was all settled at last; the letter had but just come. May was to go home with her to The Hollies. Half-laughing, half-crying, the two friends hurried up stairs to pack. Soon they were being driven rapidly toward the station.

Those had been happy holidays. What with riding and driving, boating on the lake, and picnic parties, the six weeks passed like a pleasant dream. Soon she was back at the school again. She might have fancied she had never left it, were it not for Fred Dunstable's little emerald ring shining upon her hand. That ring troubled her. She had suffered Fred to place it on her finger; had almost promised—not now, of course, but some day far in the dim future—she would be his wife, and she was not quite sure that she loved him. But then she liked Fred very much; not, of course, quite so well as Uncle Gregory, nor Kate, nor perhaps old Patience, who had been like a mother to her, but next to these three, and it had been so hard to say no outright.

She was in church next, in one of the pews which belonged to the school. The organ pealed forth, and the evening hymn began; but the words trembled on her lips, and she scarcely dared look up from her book, for if she did, so she knew she should meet the admiring gaze of a pair of dark, melancholy eyes, fixed upon her with a look of such yearning, pleading tenderness that her romantic heart was touched.

A letter was placed in her hand one day; Jane, the waitress had been bribed to deliver it. Instinctively May knew from whom it came. She stood deliberating, with the letter in her hand. Should she open it, or ought she not rather to take it at once to Miss Malcme? No; that would perhaps get Jane into trouble.

She hesitated a moment; then slowly broke the seal. Ah! what beautiful, poetic words it contained! She read them again and again. He loved her, this handsome stranger; loved her without having seen her more than half a dozen times, and without ever having exchanged one word with her!

Well, she had heard somewhere that love at first sight was the truest love; but he had no right to have written to her like that, and she knew she ought to be very angry. Of course she was not going to answer the letter; only—only something ought to be done to prevent him sending her another. So she just wrote him two lines, in her round, school girl hand, telling him he must never attempt to do such a thing again.

But that did not stop the letters coming; perhaps she had almost hoped it would not. She was getting to care for him more than she dared own to herself. Meetings followed in the little summer-house at the bottom of the garden. He had to climb the orchard-wall to get there, and she had to steal twenty minutes from her study hour. Of course it was all very wrong—very wrong indeed; and what she most felt was not being able to take Kate into her confidence. But it was so delightfully romantic, and May believed she knew what it was really to love now.

When he asked her to be his wife, how could she refuse? She hardly thought it strange that he should wish the marriage to be a secret one. Was not an elopement the natural sequence to their romantic courtship? She would like Uncle Gregory and Patience to have been told, and perhaps Kate; but Kate might be indignant and angry with her for her brother's sake.

She could not bear for any one to be cross with her. She was to write to Uncle Gregory immediately after the marriage. He would be sure to forgive her. He could not be angry with her for long.

What a bright, clear morning it was when she turned her back for the last time on the school. Not a soul was stirring in the house. She had kissed Kate as she slept, then silently descended the stairs, unbarred the shutters, opened the low French windows, and stepped out onto the lawn, where the dewdrops glistened in the early morning sun. She was a little frightened; her heart was a little sore; but she forgot all when Marimaduke Langley took her in his arms and thanked and blessed her for her bravery and trust in him.

It was a dismal wedding—in a moldy



old church somewhere in the suburbs. No one was present but the clergyman, the pew-opener and the vergier. Not the sort of wedding she and Kate had so often talked of, where the bride would, of course, be in satin, and lace, and orange-blossoms, and be followed by a long train of bridesmaids. Now she stood by the altar in her old school frock of black alpaca. What could have tempted her to come away in that dress? It was so dreadfully unlucky to be married in black!

A chill dread crept over her—a foreboding of evil; the empty church struck so icy cold, and it smelt like a vault! She glanced around, terror-stricken. If there had only been some friend near, she would have fled. But where could she go?—to whom could she fly? Ah, no; it was too late! The clergyman was already reading the service; she had mechanically spoken the fatal words; and Marmaduke, with a strange, exultant look in his eyes, had imprinted a husband's kiss upon her lips.

Oh, why was not Kate here to save her?—Kate, who was so strong, so sensible! The damp, moldy scent of the old church was in her nostrils; Marmaduke's arms held her in a vise-like clasp from which she could not escape. The clergyman stood passively aside—he would not help her.

A horrible darkness was spreading over the church; the distant aisles were in shadow; vague, indistinct, intangible forms—doubly awful because of their indistinctness—crept up out of the blackness. The air was full of them! They came nearer—nearer! Soon they would close in round her! Already their shroud-like, vapory garments almost touched her!

Her brain reeled; she could bear no more. She made one supreme effort to release herself, and shrieked out for help.

"Oh, Kate, save me! save me!"

With a wild cry, she opened her eyes.

Two arms were still encircling her; but they were loving arms, holding her fondly. Was that really Kate's face so near her own?—Kate's dear eyes looking into hers with such tender solicitude? Surely, she must be dreaming still!

But no; here she was in her own drawing-room at Normanton, and it was indeed Kate's voice which spoke to her.

"My darling, it is I; tell me what it is that troubles you?"

She could not reply; she could only fall, weeping, on her friend's neck.

Just then the drawing-room door opened softly, and Mrs. Dexter came in with the tea-tray in her hands. Her step was so noiseless that neither of them heard her enter.

She put the tray down on a small table, and then stood looking at them suspiciously. "Abel did right to send me in," she thought.

"Mrs. Langley is capable of saying anything when she is in that mood."

"Perhaps you would like me to pour the tea out for you, ma'am, as you don't seem very well?" she said, blandly.

Her mistress started at her voice. How cruelly it recalled her to the present! She dried her eyes quickly, and endeavored to regain her composure.

"No, no, thank you, Mrs. Dexter. I will do it myself; I am better now."

"I am glad of that, ma'am; you know the doctor said it was very necessary you should keep perfectly quiet, and not excite yourself."

She smiled as she spoke—not a pleasant smile—and her eyes rested on Mrs. Langley with a glance that was full of meaning.

Lately, she had constituted herself a sort of maid to Mrs. Langley. The poor girl was anything but pleased by this arrangement, but she felt herself utterly powerless to raise any objection; probably it would have made no difference if she had. The consequence was that she was hardly ever from the woman's presence.

If she walked in the park, Mrs. Dexter would be sure to follow her soon with a shawl or a sunshade. Whenever Mrs. Mellor came to see her, Mrs. Dexter would bring in the afternoon tea, generally taking care to leave the door open when she went out again. At any moment she would come unexpectedly into the room on some pretext or other. There was no denying the fact, Mrs. Langley was spied upon—watched in her own house, and very closely watched too.

"I don't like that woman, May," Kate said, decidedly, when they were alone again. "You know I always flattered myself I was rather a judge of character. Who is she?"

May glanced nervously toward the door before she replied.

"She is the housekeeper; but she nursed me when baby was born, and she has waited on me since."

Kate had noticed the look, and wondered at it. May seemed strangely in awe of her servant.

"Oh, yes, I must see your baby; is she like you or Mr. Langley?"

"I—I don't know; like 'Duke, I think." Her face looked a shade paler, and it almost seemed as if she shuddered. "But never mind baby now; tell me about yourself. How did you find me out?"

"Oh, that was no very difficult matter. Mrs. Brereton is a sort of aunt of mine—at least, she is a cousin of papa. When she was staying with us in town this season she told me you were living here quite near her. Of course I was instantly seized with a great wish to come on a long visit to The Grange, though, as a rule, it is not a very lively house, my



dear. Aunt Constance said that you denied yourself to all visitors, and that most likely you would not see me. But I am not like any ordinary visitor, am I? Say you are glad I am here, May."

"Yes, dear, I am glad; why should I not be?"

But there was a want of heartiness in May's tone, and that half-frightened look came into her eyes, which were filling with tears.

"May, what is wrong—what is it that has changed you so? You are ill and unhappy. Oh, my dear, can't I help you?"

"No one can help me—no one!" Mrs. Langley whispered, with another quick glance toward the door. "Hush! say no more."

At the same time she placed her trembling hand over her friend's mouth, for the handle of the door turned slightly.

It was her husband who entered this time. He came forward with forced cheerfulness as May introduced him to her friend, and for some time they talked on general subjects; but the conversation flagged perceptibly, and there was constraint in the manner of all.

It seemed that Kate was to have no chance of seeing May alone. She rose to take her leave presently, feeling that the visit had altogether not been a satisfactory one. But she was not to be balked so easily. She was quite determined that she would see her again before long, and alone too.

"What! must you be going already?" May asked, somewhat feebly.

"Yes, dear; I promised Aunt Constance I would be back by six. But I think you said you had not been out all day. Why not come with me a little way?"

"Yes, I shall like it very much," May replied, quickly.

She had half-risen from her chair; but she sunk back again, and the words died from her lips, for she had met her husband's eyes fixed on her with a look of doubt and suspicion in them.

"He is afraid to trust me," she thought, bitterly; "he fears I may be tempted to say more than I ought. He should know me better than that. After all, what does it matter—what does anything matter now? Then aloud she added, "It looks very warm out; I dare say it will be wiser if I stay in the house."

Mr. Langley understood why she so suddenly changed her mind, and his heart smote him.

"You won't find it too warm in the wood, May, it is quite cool and shady beneath the trees," he said, laying his hand upon the bell. "I will ring for your hat."

He watched the two friends as they crossed the lawn, each with an arm around the other's waist. How often he had seen them walking

just in the same way a year ago in the garden behind the school! May's step was more elastic then; her cheeks had the glow of health in them, and a smile was ever ready on her lips. It was seldom she smiled now.

"He turned away from the window with a groan; he could not bear to see her now, remembering what she was then. The change was too painful, and it had been his doing. Why had he not left her in peace?—why had he come into her life only to mar it?"

"I wonder you should let them go off like that alone."

It was Mrs. Dexter who spoke; she did not even make a pretense of civility when strangers were not present. She was standing close behind him, looking over his shoulder.

He did not resent her right to question him.

"Why should I not?" was all he said.

"Why? I should think you ought to know that best yourself. Here's this school friend of hers has turned up to whom she has likely been in the habit of confiding everything. What's to prevent her telling her all now?"

"She would not for my sake," Mr. Langley replied; but there was a want of confidence in his tone.

"Wouldn't she?" Mrs. Dexter laughed out loudly and coarsely. "Don't flatter yourself she cares for you, now that she knows the truth; 'tisn't in human nature she should. I told you how it would be when you came back that day and said you were married; didn't I?"

"You did," he replied, calmly—the calmness of despair. The same thought had been haunting him for some weeks. "But I loved her so! I had had so little happiness in my dreary life! Why should my life be one long sacrifice? Heaven knows I would have kept the truth from her if I could!"

"And so you sacrificed her—" Mrs. Dexter began. But he looked so wretched that even she thought it wiser to pursue the subject no further. "What can't be cured must be endured," she said, as she left the room. "But I'd keep an eye on that friend of hers, if I were you."

## CHAPTER V.

### A FRIEND IN NEED.

"You look tired, dear; let us rest here; it is delightfully cool by the water."

And Kate Dunstable sat down on the bank of the river, almost in the same place as Bess and Abel Dexter had chosen for their meeting an hour or so before.

May sunk down wearily beside her, and rested her head lovingly on her friend's shoulder.

"Oh, Kate, it is good to be with you again!" she sighed. "How I wish I could awake and find the last twelve months had been only a dream!"



"Then your marriage has not been a happy one, dear?" Kate said, very gently.

She did not want to force May's confidence; but she thought it would be a relief to her to speak.

"I did not say that, Kate. No, no; I am sure I did not say so!"

She looked behind her timidly, as if she feared some one might be lurking behind the trees.

"You did not say so, certainly; but, as a rule, if one is happy, one would rather that happiness were a reality than a dream."

"Ah, you are so clever. It is no use trying to deceive you; and it is true, Kate, I am not happy; I am very, very wretched!"

"He is not cruel to you, my poor child? Do not say that Mr. Langley is unkind to you!"

She drew the poor trembling girl nearer to her, as if to protect her from all danger.

"Unkind!" May exclaimed. "'Duke unkind! Ah, how little you know him! He has never used one hard word to me since the day we were married. Kate, were you very angry, did you think very badly of me when you found I had gone away without one word?"

"I was very grieved, dear, to think you should not have taken me into your confidence; but I think, perhaps, I can guess at the reason. It was because of Fred, was it not?"

"Yes, partly. I thought naturally you would have been vexed with me on his account, for I did treat him very badly, I know that. How he must hate and despise me now!"

Kate preferred to ignore the latter part of her remark.

"It would have been kinder to have told him the truth at the time," she said. "And it *was* the truth that you did not love him; I felt sure of it from the first. You are so totally dissimilar in every way. Fred is so practical—so matter-of-fact. Mr. Langley is as romantic as yourself, I should say. Do you know, May, I have often wondered why he took so much trouble to meet you secretly and then run away with you, instead of getting your uncle's consent to your marriage, and being married in an orthodox way. He is a gentleman, and had just inherited this property. Mr. Sandford could hardly have objected to him."

"Perhaps uncle Gregory would have thought me too young," May stammered, "and 'Duke wished there should be no delay; he was so afraid something might happen that would separate us. But oh, Kate! uncle Gregory has been so cruel to me, so very unkind! I know I had no right to act as I did after all his kindness to me; I know it was deceitful and wicked of me, but I fancied he loved me too well not to forgive me."

"And has he not?" Kate inquired, in surprise. "There must be some mistake—some extraordinary misunderstanding somewhere. I saw your uncle not very long ago. Let me see—it was last winter in St. Louis; we were all spending a few weeks there, and he was at the same hotel. Papa knew him slightly, and when I heard who he was, you may be sure I was anxious to make his acquaintance for your sake."

The languid, apathetic expression passed from May's face. She laid her hand on her friend's arm and looked up eagerly into her face.

"And did he speak of me, Kate? Oh, tell me all he said."

"Yes, he did speak of you, but not until we had got to be quite friendly, and that took some little time. I think he took rather a fancy to me after a little bit.

"I am sure that it was no more than his duty to do so, considering that I never in all my life took so much trouble to please any one. I used to play cribbage with him of an evening sometimes; and now and then we would walk together around town. Oh, how tired I used to get of that monotonous, uninteresting stretch of pavement! And all this time he never once mentioned your name voluntarily.

"Well, I could stand it no longer, and we were going away in a day or two. I was determined to make him speak of you. You see, I had of course asked after you before, but I saw by his manner that the subject was a painful one."

"Ah, yes, I understand," May said, with a sigh. "He wishes to forget me. But go on, dear."

"We were sitting in one of the little glass-houses looking out over the sea. He had been silent for a long time. I felt sure he was thinking of you, and I made up my mind to speak. Then he told me all; how you had sent a letter to him on the day of your marriage begging him to forgive you; and how he had written back in the first burst of anger, saying he never wished to see you nor to speak to you again."

"Yes, it was a cruel letter," May said, "and it made me very miserable; yet I did not quite believe he really meant what he said. I fancied he would relent in time."

"And so he did. He told me he regretted it almost as soon as the letter was posted."

"Then why has he never taken any notice of any of the letters I have written to him since?"

"What! did you then really write to him again?" Kate cried, excitedly. "He never heard from you but that once; he told me so. He fancied that you could not forgive him for the harsh words he used in that first note. And



though he has posted many and many a letter to you since, he had no reply to one. He believed you had quite ceased to love him."

"I can't understand it all," said May, in an awe-stricken tone. "Some one must have intercepted the letters. It must be—"

She paused abruptly, fearing to say more.

"After all," she added, thoughtfully, "it is far better Uncle Gregory should not come here. Yes; it could do no good. But I should like to send him just one line to say that I shall never forget him—that I love him as I always have—no, more; for I am more in need of love and sympathy than ever I was before. Kate, I may tell you this much. There is a wretched secret in my husband's life; a fearful secret, which I may never breathe to living soul. 'Duke would have kept it from me if he could; for eleven months he succeeded; but just before my baby was born, I found it out quite by accident."

She shuddered as the recollection returned to her, and covered her face with her hands.

"And so you think it is your husband who has kept back your letters, and who wishes you to be entirely separated from your friends and relations, lest they, too, should discover it?"

"No; it is not 'Duke's doing—at least, not entirely. I think it must be Mrs. Dexter or her son—perhaps both. Oh, Kate, how I hate them! I wonder if it is very wicked to hate people as I hate them? You have not seen Dexter yet. He is 'Duke's valet, and I think I detest him more than his mother. You cannot think how insolent he is at times."

"Then why does Mr. Langley keep him?" inquired Kate, bewildered. "Why does he not send him away?"

"Because—oh, cannot you understand?—because he dare not!"

The words were scarcely uttered, when the ferns behind them were parted, and Dexter himself came leisurely forward, a fishing-basket slung across his shoulder, and a fishing-rod in his hand.

"Excuse me interrupting you, ma'am, but Mr. Langley told me, if I happened to come across you, to say he hoped you wouldn't stop out too long, for the dew will soon be rising."

There was a gleam of malice in his black eyes, which made both girls feel certain he had overheard, at any rate, part of their conversation; how much, it was impossible to say.

May trembled with apprehension; but Kate rose and regarded him defiantly. For a moment or two they stood looking at each other, distrust on the face of both. Kate's eyes were the first to waver and fall, for an expression of bold, undisguised admiration had come into his.

Such a look would have been an insult from any one; but from a man in his position—a servant!—it made her wish she were a man

that she might strike him. A hot flush of indignation spread up to the roots of her fair hair. Perhaps he guessed something of her feelings; but, if such were the case, it did not appear to affect him in the very smallest degree. Kate fancied she heard him laugh softly to himself as he turned upon his heel, and moved off to where a turn in the river hid him from their sight.

"I am afraid you must go, dear," she said to May. "It is not safe for us to talk here; and if you remain longer, we shall be suspected. You are right about that man; he looks dangerous, and I mistrust him entirely."

"But we shall meet again—I shall see you again before long?" May pleaded.

"Yes; but I must think it all over and arrange something. In the mean time, write your letter to your uncle. Stay; you see that fallen willow, a little lower down, close to the water, not very far from where my boat is moored? There is a hollow in the trunk. If you can manage to get away unperceived tomorrow morning, come here early and place the letter there. I will go and fetch it some time in the day, and it shall be posted the same evening."

"Dear Kate, you are a true friend! How I wish I could tell you all; but I dare not, for the secret is not my own."

"Yes—yes, I quite understand; do not let that trouble you. Poor little May! I would give a great deal to be able to help you—to make you look a little more like what you used to be in the old days. And now good-by. We shall soon meet again, never fear."

Kate stood looking after her until she had reached the little path leading to the drive; then, with a sigh, she turned and walked quickly to where the boat was fastened.

Not a dozen yards from it stood Abel Dexter fishing.

Of course there was nothing against his being there. He had more right there than she had.

Yet Kate felt angry; she believed he had chosen that spot only because it was there she must cross the river.

Turning her back upon him, she hurriedly began trying to unloosen the knots in the rope which secured the boat to the trunk of a tree. The old proverb of "more haste, less speed," was never truer than then; for the more she pulled and tugged away at the cord the tighter it became. Surely she never tied it so firmly as this herself!

Abel laid down his fishing-rod and came toward her. She heard his step approaching. What would she not have given then for a knife? Sinking on her knees on the damp ground, she tried to loosen the stubborn knots with her teeth. Not a dignified attitude for a young lady; but Kate was desperate.



"Perhaps I can do it for you," he said; "won't you let me try?"

What did he mean by speaking to her in that tone—almost as if he considered himself an equal?

"No, thank you; I can manage it quite well myself," Kate replied, haughtily—that is, as haughtily as she could under the circumstances.

It was not very easy to look haughty and dignified kneeling there among the river sedges.

Abel went leisurely back to his place and resumed his fishing.

For ten minutes more she worked away bravely, till her fingers ached and her teeth felt loose. Still the knot was as tight as ever.

A large drop of rain splashed down upon her hand; then another. The sky had become overcast; there was evidently going to be a heavy storm.

Abel drew in his line and put up his fishing-tackle. He was going away. Soon he would pass her. If he offered to help her now she would not refuse.

But he did not offer; he did not even glance in her direction. She rose to her feet; there was no help for it, she must speak to him or go back to the Hall for assistance.

"Do you happen to have a knife with you?" she asked, with assumed carelessness, as if the idea had but just occurred to her.

He pretended not to hear her. She had to repeat her question; then he stopped, a slight smile of quiet amusement on his lips, infinitely more irritating than words could have been. Taking a knife from his pocket, he opened it and handed it to her.

Kate took it and cut away the rope almost savagely, fully conscious that he was watching her with that disagreeable smile still on his lips. Soon the boat was free, and she was rowing vigorously across the river.

It was raining hard now. She was not sorry, when she had landed and was walking quickly toward the house, to see some one coming toward her with an umbrella and shawl.

When she came nearer, to her surprise she saw it was her brother Fred. Her heart gave a sudden bound and then seemed to stand still, for she guessed at once that something must be wrong at home and he had come to fetch her. Her little sister had not been well when she last heard from home; perhaps she was worse—seriously ill!

"Oh, Fred!" she cried, running up to him and clasping her hands over his arm, "what is it—is anything the matter?"

"My dear girl, if you get so excited before you hear a word, how shall I be able to tell you?"

He stooped and kissed her; then, unfolding the shawl, wrapped it round her.

"Don't keep me in suspense, please, Fred! Is it Dora?"

"Yes, it is Dora," he replied, gravely. "She has the scarlet fever. We all thought it wiser that you should not come home; but she was not so well last night, and she asked for you, and so—"

"And so you have come for me. It was cruel not to have told me the truth from the first. There could be no danger for me, for I have had the fever. Please walk faster; we must start immediately."

"No; certainly not!" he said, decidedly. "You are out of breath already. There is not a train for more than an hour, and we shall not take twenty minutes driving to the station. You will have plenty of time to change your wet clothes and get something to eat. Remember, we have a long journey before us, and you will need all your strength when you arrive."

Perhaps it was not very surprising, with so much to think of and trouble her, that Kate forgot all about May. It was not until she and Fred were in the train that she remembered her promise about the letter.

They were just passing Normanton. The red chimneys of the old Hall could be seen above the trees. It was that which reminded her.

What would poor May think of her going away without any explanation?

Of course she could write as soon as she got home, but it was more than doubtful whether the letter would ever be allowed to reach the person for whom it was intended.

In her dilemma she could think of nothing better than asking her brother's advice. In a few words as possible she told him of her interview with Mrs. Langley.

She was a little surprised at the way in which he received her news. She had never seen Fred so excited before. She had fancied it was possible he might care for May still, but she did not know how much until now.

When the first flush of anger had faded from his face, it left him deathly pale.

"I shall sift this to the bottom, Kate," he said firmly. "Who knows what horrible crime this man may not have committed? Is she to be always kept a prisoner in her own house—watched, insulted, and intimidated by her own servants? Is her life to be sacrificed for his? Good Heaven! to think that I should have lost her for this!"

"But, Fred," his sister interposed, gently, "remember, whatever Mr. Langley may have been guilty of, he is her husband. Do you imagine that May would thank you for dragging this wretched secret to light? Though it may cost her much, she is as anxious as he is to hide the truth."

"Kate," he said, bending forward, the bet-



ter to see how she received his words, and speaking in a low, concentrated voice, "who can say but he may have been already married when he tempted May to elope with him? Perhaps she is not really his wife."

There were beads of perspiration on his brow as he concluded, and the hand which in his eagerness he had laid on hers trembled perceptibly; but she had no pity for him. She shook off the hand angrily, and her eyes flashed upon him indignantly.

"And you can think this of her—of the woman you pretended to love! Do you believe May capable, once she had learnt the truth; of staying one hour longer beneath his roof?"

"Forgive me, Kate!" he said despondently. "I don't think I quite know what I am saying."

"And all this time you are not helping me. You say nothing of how that letter is to be got from the trunk of the willow."

"I see no other way than going to fetch it."

"You! Do you mean that you will go back to Normanton for it?"

"Yes; if Dora is better, I will return by the first train. If the letter is left there, it may fall into somebody else's hands."

But more than the wish to get the letter was the desire to be near May, to be ready to save and protect her in case of need.

## CHAPTER VI.

### TWO SCHEMERS.

OLD Mrs. Pearson had spoken no more than the truth when she described Mrs. Dexter's sitting-room as being "fit for any fine lady." The carpet was of the richest and softest; the chair-coverings and window-hangings of delicately tinted satin brocade; valuable pictures—the greatest gems of the old Squire's collection—adorned the walls; while the cabinets contained old china and ornaments so costly that the former mistress of Normanton had suffered no one to touch them but herself, dusting them always with her own fair hand.

Abel had had this room prepared for his mother under his own especial supervision, and it did him credit.

Mrs. Dexter was seated before a small table, on which was a quantity of lace, yellow with age. She had been a lady's-maid at one time, and had had too much to do with lace not to fully understand and appreciate its value.

Abel came in presently, looking tired and cross. He flung himself down heavily on one of the couches, never heeding that his dirty boots left a mark on the satin cushion.

Mrs. Dexter loved her son; perhaps he occupied the one soft spot in her heart. Going up to him, she laid her hand caressingly on his forehead.

"It aches, dear, I know," she said—her voice

always took a softer tone when she addressed him. "Shall I fetch you some eau-de-Cologne?"

He jerked his head away from her impatiently.

"For goodness sake, mother, leave me in peace. Can't you see I am fagged to death and worried, and want to be let alone? You ought to know by this time that I hate being fawned upon. If you want to be of use, get me a glass of brandy and soda."

"Oh, Abel!" she remonstrated. "You almost promised me yesterday you would try and leave off this evil habit. It is growing on you, dear, or I wouldn't speak. Remember what came of it last month. If you had been quite yourself, you would never have forgotten to draw the heavy bolt of that door, and Mrs. Langley would have learned nothing to this day."

"Are you going to bring all that up again? You are forever dinning it into my ears."

"I wouldn't speak of it, my boy, but for the sake of getting you to let the brandy alone."

"What else can a fellow do but drink during this infernally hot weather?" he retorted.

"But there, mother, just get it me now, there's a good soul; my throat is parched with thirst. One glass won't hurt me."

With a sigh, she rose and did as he bade her.

When she had received the empty glass from his hands she went back to her place and began sorting and folding the lace.

"What is it you have got there?" he asked.

"Some lace, dear; they are beautiful, and worth quite a little fortune. I found them in the old wardrobe; such a quantity, too!"

"So you have been at your old games!" he cried, rising and regarding her angrily. "Didn't I tell you I'd have you take nothing more?"

"Nonsense, Abel; I only take what was in the house when we came. I don't believe Mrs. Langley has a notion of half what is here. I found the inventory, and have got it myself, put away safely. It is but anticipating things a little, anyway," she added, with a laugh. "I suppose you won't grudge me these bits of things when they come to you?"

"I am sick to death of it all," he said, with a frown. "Sometimes I think it would be wiser to throw the whole business up, and go off with what we have got."

"Abel!" Mrs. Dexter looked at him in blank dismay; and the flounce of Brussels point which she was in the act of folding, fell from her hands to the ground! "You must be mad! What! go away and give up all chance of being the master of Normanton?"

"I think it is more than doubtful I shall ever be that," he replied, gloomily.



"You seem to forget the will, duly signed and witnessed, made six months ago, on the very day before we came here."

"What is to prevent his making another?"

"He cannot!" Mrs. Dexter exclaimed, triumphantly; "for we could soon prove it was no better than waste paper!"

"We could, certainly; but that wouldn't help us," Abel rejoined, sharply; her confidence irritated him. "Would you like to know what he said to me not an hour ago?" he inquired, looking up at her from under his black brows. "I suppose I had angered him, and put him out of patience. 'Take care, Dexter,' he said; 'you may go too far. A little more, and I will risk everything and give myself up.'"

"He never said that?" cried his mother.

"He did; and, what is more, I believe he meant what he said, too. I have noticed a change in him lately—a change I don't like. Since his little fool of a wife has been in the secret, he hasn't been the same man. He knows that she fears him now more than loves him; and he can't help seeing how ill and wretched she is. My opinion is he will disappear one of these fine days if we don't keep a pretty sharp look-out after him."

"That would spoil everything with a vengeance," his mother said, thoughtfully. "It would be hard to give up all, just as it seems within our grasp. But don't be in a hurry, Abel; you may be wrong. He is such a coward, I believe he will put up with anything sooner than let the truth be known. I can't see Normanton slip through our fingers without making one effort to keep it. After all, my boy, it should have been yours by right. It will be no more than justice for you to reign here as master."

"And, in the mean time, I am nothing but a servant!" he remarked bitterly. "And I've got to endure the haughty sneers and superior airs of girls who would be glad enough to be my wife if I were master here instead of valet."

"Never mind, dear; all that will be changed when that time comes."

"Yes, *when* it comes! It's only your nervous silliness that keeps it back now. What does that fellow Marks want here? He is coming up to the window—like his impudence!"

"What do you want, Marks? I told you, only the other day, that if you wanted to see me, you could come to the front door and ask to speak to me."

"It's only a half-dozen of sparrers, Mr. Dexter, as I've been and trapped for your owls," the gardener said, handing the birds in at the window.

"Then why the devil do you bring them here? Just take them round to the kitchen and give them to the cook, will you? If I want them I will get them. But it's not at all

likely, for I mean to let the birds out to-night to forage for themselves."

The man was turning away, but at Abel's words he stopped and looked at him imploringly.

"Oh! sir, I do hope as you don't mean that! I do hope as you won't let 'em out to-night of all nights. My poor old woman is tock worse."

He paused and rubbed his coat-sleeve across his eyes.

"What on earth has all this to do with me?" Abel asked, irritably.

"Well, you see, sir, I got them sparrers only because I thought they'd keep the dratted birds quiet. And now, if you go and let one on 'em out, Polly'll not get a wink of sleep the livelong night. Now, if you must let 'em out, couldn't you let the two loose for once? Maybe they then wouldn't make such a row. It's the one as is still shut up makes such a screaming, a-crying for its mate."

It was a long speech for old Marks to make. Few of the servants ever ventured to remonstrate with Abel Dexter.

"Have you quite done?" Abel asked, in ill-suppressed rage. He had been longing for something on which to vent his bad temper for some time.

"Yes, sir; I don't know as I've anything else to say."

Mark's voice had grown very despondent—he knew his mission had failed.

"Then be off with you and go on with your digging; and remember, I am not one to stand being dictated to. Do you think I shall consult your wishes as to whether I let the birds out or not? Let me hear no more of this. If you don't find the situation at the cottage to your liking, you can leave it. There's many a man would be only too glad to have your place; and I don't know but we should be the gainers by the change."

"I am sure I didn't mean that, Mr. Dexter; and I wouldn't have spoken as I did if I'd thought 'twould have angered you. I meant no offense; but Polly, she begged me to do my best. She's nervous, you see, and the cries them birds gives is enough to frighten a timid thing like her—it's so awful human."

Marks turned away, very sore at heart.

He was an old man, and his wife was slowly dying. He could not risk being turned out of his situation at such a time.

When he was gone Mrs. Dexter carefully closed the window, and then cast an anxious look of inquiry upon her son.

"Did you mean what you said, Abel? Will the bird have to be let loose to-night?"

"Yes, I think so; it will be safest, anyway. One never knows what may happen. If I am not greatly mistaken, we shall have a bad time of it."

"I am always so anxious about you, my



boy, at these times," she said, with a deep sigh. "I would almost as soon trust you in a den of wild beasts as see you enter that hateful room!"

"And yet you won't let me have my own way," he rejoined, sullenly. "How long is this to go on, I should like to know? Mother, I am growing desperate. I shall leave the door unbolted to-night; I will put it off no longer. We have agreed that it shall be done, sooner or later. What is the use of delaying?"

"No, no; not that, Abel! We might be murdered in our beds!"

She clung to him, trembling in every limb, her eyes wide open in terror.

He pushed her from him roughly. She had to take hold of the back of a chair to prevent herself from falling. A contemptuous sneer curled the corner of his thin lips as he regarded her.

"What a coward you are, mother!" he cried, scornfully. "All my life you have led me to believe that Normanton shall be mine. We have waited long enough, as you know, to come here. I thought the old Squire was never going to die; and, even then, six months were wasted, what with repairing the place, and one thing and another. Now, when there is nothing more to be done, and I say that the finishing touch must be put to what we have both been planning and plotting for all these years, you shrink from it."

Mrs. Dexter covered her face with both hands; her whole frame shook with emotion, which she vainly strove to conquer.

"Have you so easily forgotten your own wrongs, and how you swore you would one day have your revenge, and see me righted? Mother, I am ashamed of you; I thought you would have had more spirit."

Her hands dropped helplessly to her side. She was white to the lips, and her voice was but little above a whisper.

"Do as you will, Abel; I will say no more. Only don't let it be this time. If it must be, let it be when I am away from here. I will go to New York when the time comes."

"Perhaps it would be better. You are so weak. If you were here, very likely you would say or do something that would betray us. Yes, I see it would be wiser you should not be here. I can manage best alone."

"Don't speak like that, Abel; you talk as if you were going to do it yourself!" she exclaimed, with a shudder. "Remember, it won't be your doing, whatever happens!"

"No; it won't be my doing," he rejoined, with a short laugh; "but I shall be obliging enough to give the opportunity."

His mother did not join in the laugh; even she felt something like horror at his treating

such a subject lightly. She was leaving the room, when he called her back.

"Where are you going now?" he asked, authoritatively. He seemed to enjoy the petty tyranny which he exercised over her.

"I was going to look for Mrs. Langley," she replied, meekly. "I haven't seen her for over an hour. Goodness knows what she is up to! I was so taken up with this lace, and then with talking with you, that I forgot all about her."

"Well, you can come back and look over your precious laces a little longer, if you like. Luckily, I don't trust everything to you. She was off to the wood long ago."

"Good gracious, Abel! Why didn't you tell me as soon as you came in? I must go after her at once. She will be meeting that Miss Dunstable there, who is stopping at Colonel Brereton's. The Grange grounds are only divided from ours by the river, you know."

"Exactly; but you see I have already sent her husband after her. Oh, he saves me a lot of trouble, I can tell you."

While this little scene had been taking place in Mrs. Dexter's room, May had made her way through the wood, taking the direction of the river.

The precious letter was in her pocket. In a few minutes more it would be safe in the trunk of the fallen tree, and by to-morrow uncle Gregory would know that she had never for a moment ceased to love him.

Her heart beat fast, and the unusual exercise brought a faint flush to her cheeks. She believed she had left the house quite unobserved; but before she had gone far, the sound of rapid footsteps behind her made her turn round in sudden alarm.

The next moment she was face to face with Mr. Langley.

"I thought perhaps you would let me come with you, May, if you are going for a walk," he said, hesitatingly. "We see so little of each other now."

His eyes fell beneath her mournful look of reproach, and the color spread over his face. He knew intuitively she had divined his reason for following her.

"You are afraid to trust me alone, 'Duke,'" she said, sadly. "Is it always to be like this? Am I always to be watched and followed?"

"Heaven knows I meant to trust you!" he cried, wildly. "When some demon thought has tempted me to doubt you I have tried to put it from me. I believed you loved me too much to betray me; but your love has turned to horror and loathing. Ah, yes, you cannot deny it! You shrink from me even as I speak."

"'Duke—'Duke, you don't know what you are saying! Why should I hate you?"

"Is there not reason enough? Have I not sufficient proof, if proof were needed?"



He came nearer to her, bending till his hot breath was in her face.

"Listen," he said, his voice hoarse and unnatural. "You thought you were alone just now when you wrote the letter; but you were not. I was in the room, hidden by the window curtain. I had not gone there to spy upon you. I wished for nothing more than to be near you; to breathe the same air as you did; to see your dear eyes without that look of terror in them which my presence always brings. It was reward enough for me if your dress but touched me in passing. I was so near, I need but have put out my arms to have clasped you to my heart; but I stifled the wild longing that was in me, as I have stifled it so often of late. Then I saw you take paper and envelope and write the words which are to bring my ruin. That letter is in your pocket now! Ah, you tremble! It is true; I have found you out. You were to meet your friend here and give it to her, no doubt. In a few days my cousin would have learnt all, and I should be taken from you, a prisoner!—betrayed by my wife—the only being in this whole world whom I love!"

May had cowered from him, a look of fright in her distended eyes; but now she started forward, her arms outstretched, forgetting her fear in pity for his great agony.

"No, no; you are wrong. See, you shall read the letter yourself: it is not to your cousin. Oh, 'Duke, how could you think me capable of that!"

With trembling fingers, she tore open the envelope and held the sheet of paper before him.

"Look; there is no word here that could betray you. I only wanted to let uncle Gregory know that I had not forgotten him. I said there were reasons why we might never meet again; but that he must not think I had ceased to love him."

Her voice shook, and large tears rolled down her pale cheeks.

"There! I will tear it up. It shall not go at all. What does it matter? One day all things will be known. Life is so short."

As the pieces of paper fell fluttering to the ground, involuntarily her eyes were raised to the blue sky above, with a look of yearning, weary longing.

Her husband gazed at her spell-bound. How frail and weak she looked! He had never fully realized how ill and changed she was until now. Was she going to die? If so, it would be his doing—he would have killed her!

He staggered back against a tree, covering his eyes with his hands. He wanted to think. It had come to this; he must choose between his life and hers.

Ah, but if his were the sacrifice, he would

have to give up more than life itself. How could he live away from her? If only they could *die* together—he, she, and the child! Surely that would be the best way of putting an end to all their troubles? It would be so sweet to die like that. No one could part them then!

He wondered how it had been possible that the idea had never occurred to him before. Now that the glorious thought had come, he seized it eagerly, gladly—gloating over it. He could almost laugh out in his joy to think how soon they would all be free.

But the look of exultation faded from his face; in its place came the old expression of hopeless melancholy.

It was the sight of Abel Dexter coming toward them which caused the change.

Mr. Langley's eyes sought the ground as the valet drew near, fearful lest they should betray the thoughts which were passing in his mind.

Dexter was very clever; it was seldom he trusted him for long out of his sight. But—who could tell!—the time might come. He must be very wary; he would watch and wait.

## CHAPTER VII.

### A VILLAIN'S POLICY.

"I've come to ask if you'd mind looking in on my old woman to-night, Mrs. Pearson," Marks, the gardener, said, putting his head in at the lodge door.

"What! is she worse again, John? Well, well, it's a hard life for some of us. Come in, do; and tell us all about it. It's lucky we're up; we're in bed most nights afore this; but I had some ironing to finish."

"And I wouldn't have come at such a time, but she's going, poor thing—she's going fast. There's not bite nor sup has passed her mouth this blessed day!"

He shook his head dejectedly as he sunk wearily into the chair which the old woman pushed toward him.

"I feel strange and lonely-like when I think of there being only her and me in the cottage. I'd take it kindly if you'd come and watch with me to-night. You're more used to sick folks than I am, and you and she was always friends."

"And that's true enough," she replied, her thoughts going back to the time when she and little Polly had played together on the village green; "we was fast friends, Polly and I, ever since we was little more than babies. I'll come with you, John, now at once, and welcome; but I'm afraid 'tisn't much any of us can do for her."

She reached for her bonnet and shawl, which were hanging on a peg behind the door.



"Bess," she called, looking toward an inner room, "I'm off to John Marks's cottage to nurse his sick wife. Maybe I'll not be back till morning."

Bess appeared in the doorway, a brush in her hand, and her red-brown hair loose and falling in pretty waves and curls all over her shoulder. Bess spent most of her spare time in the little closet she called her bedroom, before the square of cracked looking-glass, brushing and combing her beautiful hair. This evening she had been amusing herself by arranging it as Mrs. Langley did hers, smiling complacently at her own reflection as she acknowledged to herself, with a flush of triumph and gratified vanity, that she was prettier—yes, a hundred times prettier—than the lady up at the Hall! She had but just time to pull it down when her granddaughter called her.

"So your wife's worse, is she, Mr. Marks?" she asked, somewhat carelessly.

Bess thought too much of her own little worries to have much feeling for other people's troubles.

"Yes, she is, Bess," replied the gardener; "and Abel Dexter—out of pure contrariness I do believe—has chosen this night of all nights to let them blessed owls of his out—leastways, it's one as is out and one in. Between the two of them screeching, she'll be worse still afore the morning."

"Owls," she cried, eagerly: "then there really are owls at Normanton Hall?"

"Not much doubt of that, my girl; I should have thought you'd have heard them from here."

"Then Abel was telling me the truth, after all!" she thought. "But it's no secret. He was only making a fool of me when he said that. He thinks I'm just a silly, ignorant girl that will swallow any trash he likes to tell me. I'll pay him for that, yet. Maybe there's more in those owls than folks think of. I don't see what a couple of birds wants with two doors to their room—and strong locks, too!"

"We'd better be going, Mrs. Pearson, if you're ready," said Marks. "I promised Polly I wouldn't be away long."

"Poor thing! yes, let us be off. Good-night, Bess. I mayn't be able to get back till after daylight; but you can leave the door unbelted on the chance."

"All right, Granny; and I'll have the fire lighted early and a cup of tea ready for you when you do come."

"Ah, she's a good girl, John," said the old woman, proudly, as she left the lodge with her companion—"a good and a pretty as one would wish to see; a bit fond of pleasure and finery, I don't deny—what girl isn't? But she's fond of her old Granuy, too; and her heart is in the right place."

Marks thought it wiser to make no reply

to this. He had heard one or two tales he didn't like about the girl lately, and he knew something of her frequent meetings with Abel Dexter; but he was not going to grieve her grandmother by telling her of this. Let her keep faith in Bess as long as she can; she will know soon enough. How he wished later on that he had had the courage to speak!

Meanwhile, Bess was standing with her shapely arms folded, leaning in her favorite attitude over the garden gate. The moon was at the full; the night bright, clear and peaceful.

She was looking out dreamily over the park where the moon was shining through the trees, making the dewdrops sparkle like diamonds. She had no thought for the rare beauty of the scene; she was only saying to herself if those sparkling, glittering drops were real gems, how she would gather them by thousands and be rich—richer even than Abel could ever make her.

The cuckoo clock within the cottage behind her jerked out the hour in shrill, unmusical tones. She counted the strokes—eleven! She had no idea it was so late as that. Yet she was not at all sleepy; if she went to bed she should not close her eyes, she knew.

Hark! what was that?

The sound, though only faintly borne to her on the breeze, made her start back in alarm, it was so wild and unearthly. The next moment she laughed at herself. It was but the cry of the owls, of course.

Were these birds so big and fierce as Abel had pretended, she wondered? She would very much like to have a look at them. What was to prevent her getting her hat and walking toward the Hall? No one could see her if she kept in the shade, even if there were any one still up; but, as a rule, the whole household had retired and the house shut up for the night before this.

The idea no sooner suggested itself than she hastened to act upon it. Soon she was stepping swiftly but cautiously along the narrow footpath that skirted the drive.

Weird shadows stretched across her path, cast by the gaunt, twisted branches of the tall trees. Now and then she would stop suddenly, her heart beating fast as her eyes fell upon some dead, barkless trunk or fallen tree whose sharp outlines took almost human shape in the uncertain light. Then she would summon up all her courage and hurry past it, glancing at it fearfully the while.

She could not say what it was that made her so anxious to proceed. Something seemed to compel her to advance. Soon the stately walls of the old Hall rose before her, its tall chimneys standing out in sharp relief against the deep blue of the cloudless sky.

This part of the house was in shadow, and



no light glimmered in any of the windows. Bess did not pause here, for the cry of the birds, which had been almost continuous, came from the back. Sometimes it was low and plaintive; then suddenly it would rise to a shriek like the demoniacal laugh of a madman.

No wonder poor, nervous old Polly Marks found it impossible to sleep with such hideous sounds rending the air.

Keeping well out of the moonlight, and close to the hedge which bordered the terrace, Bess crept round to the other side of the building. A light was burning in one of the rooms here, and the blind was not drawn.

She could see Mrs. Langley, clad in a long white wrapper, her dark hair streaming far below her waist, walking agitatedly up and down.

Bess knew the baby was weak and sickly; she was kept awake by it, perhaps. Ah, yes; now she paused beside the cot, bending over it solicitously, and weeping and wringing her hands: then she would place her fingers on her ears, as if to shut out some dreaded sound.

She, too, apparently, was upset by the shrieking of the owls. Why, then, were they kept here?

It was a question Bess could not answer at all satisfactorily; yet she felt convinced there was some reason for it, some hidden mystery in all this that she was resolved to fathom.

While she was pondering on it, one of the birds swooped down past her—so near, that it almost touched her as it beat the air with its heavy wings.

It had come from an upper window, the window of the room with the double doors; she remembered it well. The sash was wide open, and on the narrow ledge sat the captive owl, chained by the leg, flapping its wings, and uttering the most dismal cries.

But stay; surely that was another cry from within?

Bess strained her ears to listen. Yes, there it was again. A cry more wild, more fearful, more human than the others. What did it mean? Abel and Marks had both spoken of two owls, and only two. Of these one was still in the park, the other she saw above her. What was it that had given that unearthly yell?

She trembled with fear as she crouched there among the bushes, her white face uplifted, her strained eyes fixed on that little upper window. Yet, even then, her curiosity was quickly mastering her fear. She was rapidly revolving in her mind the possibility of getting near enough to look into the room. She would never, perhaps, have such a chance as this again; she must make the most of the opportunity now.

There was a tree growing near the house; its

boughs reached to that very window. She remembered, on the night when she had slept there, how frightened she had been by the branches tapping against the pane. If only she could manage to climb it, her object would be gained.

Bess was a good climber; only a few weeks ago she had gone to the very top of her grandmother's biggest apple-tree in search of a bird's nest. This would be a rather more difficult feat; but she thought she could do it. She was ready to attempt harder things than that to discover the meaning of that third mysterious cry.

Abel had thought her silly and gullible, had he? Well, he should see; by to-morrow, perhaps, he might see cause to change his opinion. She would be able to make him do just what she liked, once she had found out this secret of his.

Knotted roots of ivy encircling the trunk of the tree offered uncertain footholds here and there; but notwithstanding this, Bess found it no easy matter to ascend the first few feet. However, after two or three attempts, she at length accomplished this, and once she had reached the part from which the branches sprung, she was not many minutes climbing to the desired height.

Her frock was torn in several places, and her hands were scratched and bleeding; but what of that? She neither heeded the one nor felt the other, for was she not on a level with the very window itself?

The owl, frightened at her near neighborhood, crept to the further corner of the ledge, thus enabling her more space to look within.

At first she could see nothing; the floor was some distance below the window, and only a small portion of the room was lighted by the moon. But, as she looked, something crept out from the darkness, and stood in that streak of moonlight.

Her breath came fast. For a moment she had to close her eyes in order to give herself time to recover from a sudden giddiness which had seized her.

When she looked again the figure had turned toward her. Oh, the horror of that ghastly, ashen face upraised to hers! No wonder she had to cling with all her strength to the bough to prevent herself from falling. The eyes, protruding and bloodshot, seemed to fix her with their fearful stare; both arms were stretched out toward her, the hands open and the fingers curved, as if to clutch at her. And then that horrible laughter rung out once more, peal after peal, soulless and awful in its utter mirthlessness.

Bess never quite knew how she came down from the tree, for before she had descended two-thirds of it she grew faint, her head swam,



her hands relaxed their hold, and she fell heavily to the ground.

For a time she was unconscious. When she came to herself she was lying on the grass, bruised and aching in every limb, but, fortunately, not seriously hurt.

The first thing that she realized was that some one was supporting her head. Almost at the same time came the recollection of what she had seen. With a scream, she endeavored to rise, believing she was in the grasp of the fearful being who had so alarmed her.

She was a little reassured, though not altogether so, when she looked up and saw Abel Dexter's stern face bending over her, his dark eyes blacker than ever for the suppressed anger that lurked in their depths.

She had known that he would be angry when he learned that she had foiled him, and found out what he meant to keep from her; and she had meant, notwithstanding, to tell him of the discovery she had made; yet now when he knelt beside her, gazing down at her with such cold severity, she shrunk from him in fear and trembling, all her courage gone.

With an effort she rose to her feet; but she was still a little faint, and would have fallen had he not put out his hand to save her.

"Don't look at me like that, Abel," she murmured, faintly, "or I'll think you don't love me."

Love her! She would have fled from him in terror had she known what was passing in his mind at that moment. Even then he was calmly and dispassionately deliberating whether it would not be wiser and safer for him to silence her now forever, before she should have time to talk of what she had seen that night. He could spring upon her and strangle her. It would be but the work of a moment; and he had but to carry her body to the river and cast it into the water.

There was but one thing that deterred him, and that was the fear of detection. Marks already knew of his meetings with the girl, and he thought it probable that old Mrs. Pearson might be aware of them also.

True, Bess had promised not to tell her, but he put no great faith in any girl's promise. Not because he thought that no woman could keep a secret; his opinion of the sex was not flattering nor exalted; still, he did believe a woman could be silent and loyal—once it was made thoroughly worth her while to be so.

The question now was how could he convince Bess that it would be to her advantage to say nothing of what she had seen.

"What demon of curiosity prompted you to come here to-night?" he asked, his fingers closing tightly over her arm. "I suppose the whole village will be as wise as you before you are a day older?"

Bess was cunning; she would not contradict him. Her courage was rapidly returning; with a feeling of exultation, she realized her power over him.

"What would happen if 'twas known, Abel? I don't see what difference it would make to you."

"Don't you?" he rejoined, eagerly. "It would make this difference. There would be no carriages nor fine dresses for you in the future, I can tell you. Do you know," he hissed out from between his half-closed teeth, bending his head close to hers, and speaking in a low, concentrated voice—"do you know that if you have the sense to hold your tongue it won't be very long now before I shall be master here—master, do you hear?—master!—owner of Normanton!"

"Abel," she gasped, incredulously, his words almost taking away her breath, "I can't make it all out! You never mean that you'll be the master, and me your wife?"

Perhaps that was a little more than he did mean; at any rate, he did not immediately reply.

Bess, glancing at him sideways from beneath her long lashes, fancied she saw his dark brows contract in a frown. Once he was master, she thought he might be wanting to marry a lady; it would be safer not to wait for that time.

"I'm thinking I'll find it easier to keep the secret when I am your wife, Abel," she said. The color rushed to her cheeks and her voice trembled; but she would speak. Was it not for this she had been waiting? "I don't see what's to prevent your marrying me at once instead of putting it off. If the good fortune's coming so soon, why a few weeks can't make much difference one way or another to you; and—and, Abel, you know it may make so much difference to me. I'm forever dreading lest Granny shall find out about you and me. And you wouldn't like for folks to be talking about your wife, Abel, now would you?"

His stern features never relaxed, though her voice was pleading and pathetic, and tears were shining in her eyes.

She paused for a moment, hoping he might answer with some tender, reassuring words of love; but finding he remained silent, she continued:

"Abel, dear, it can't be that you don't care for me just because I've found this out? Only let me be your wife, and you'll see I'll never so much as breathe one word! We could go away and be married on the quiet one day soon; no one need be a bit the wiser. I'd stay on here with Granny just the same. Then, when you're master here, you can claim me."

"And do you think I could allow my wife to live at the lodge?" he asked, putting his arm round her, and drawing her to him with some



show of tenderness. "No, indeed; if it must be as you say, you must go away—to New York, perhaps, where I can join you in a day or two; then we can be married, and I could leave you there in some comfortable lodgings more suitable to your future position. Is not that a better plan?"

"Oh, Abel, yes, of course; you always know best. And I'll be so glad to see New York; and you'll give me money, won't you, to get dresses and things, so that when you come I'll be looking as I ought, and you wouldn't be ashamed of me?"

"Yes, yes, to be sure; you shall have all that is necessary."

He was ready to agree to anything now that he saw so easy a method of getting her out of the way. That was the first thing to be considered. Once she was safely away there would be time enough to form plans for the future. Of one thing, at any rate, he was very sure—and that was that Bess Pearson should never be his wife.

And so he smiled to himself, a smile of quiet satisfaction, as he stooped and kissed her; and foolish, trusting Bess, laid her head upon his shoulder and almost laughed out in her happiness, believing that she had triumphed at last.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE BITTER END.

FRED DUNSTABLE had been a week at The Grange. He had gone home with Kate, just waited to hear that little Dora was better, and then returned by the first train, as he had said he would.

Mrs. Brereton was not a little surprised to see him back so soon. Had it been any one but Fred she would have been alarmed, for she knew that at one time he had been engaged to May, and she more than suspected that the young man had got over that attachment. She did feel a little uneasy when, not an hour after his arrival, he was starting with his fishing-rod in the direction of the river, and she even ventured to speak to him. But the look of pain on his frank, honest face made her feel ashamed of her suspicions before she had said half a dozen words. She felt herself growing red under his steady, reproachful gaze, and her little speech was concluded with almost an apology.

"I have known you so long, Fred," she said, "you must not mind my talking to you like this. It is not that I believe you capable of acting dishonorably, but I fear if you renew your acquaintance with Mrs. Langley it will only bring trouble to both of you. Poor girl! I am afraid her life is far from a happy one as it is."

"I know it," he replied, sadly; "and believe me, aunt Constance, I would sooner die than do anything which might add to her unhappiness. I shall not seek to speak to her—I may not even see her; but I have reason to know that she needs a friend, and I would be that friend. Cannot you trust me?"

He held out his hand as he spoke, and Mrs. Brereton placed hers unhesitatingly in it. Then he had left her and gone his way.

A few moments later, when he was rowing across the river, he heard voices in the wood. One he would have recognized anywhere—it was May's; the other he suspected to be Mr. Langley's.

Not wishing to be seen, he guided his boat in among some tall reeds, which, completely concealed him. From there he witnessed May's interview with her husband.

He could not hear what they said, but he could see that Mrs. Langley was greatly agitated. When she took a letter from her pocket and tore it up, he understood that it was the same letter which he had come to fetch, and that she was renouncing all intention of communicating with her uncle.

There was nothing for him to do but go back to The Grange as soon as they left the spot and the coast was clear. However, each morning he had crossed the river and searched in the hollow trunk of the fallen willow, thinking it was possible she might have changed her mind.

Though he hardly allowed the thought to frame itself, he had some hope of seeing her once more. Her face, as he had beheld it last, sad, pale, and tear-stained, had haunted him ever since. He said he would not seek to speak to her; still, if they should meet, perhaps she would confide to him; perhaps she might tell him of her trouble, and suffer him to help her.

But May never came near the river, never even entered the wood. It was seldom, if ever, that she went further than the terrace.

And so Fred could do nothing but torture himself with the thought that the woman he loved was unhappy—possibly, even ill-treated—and he was powerless to assist her.

There was no excuse for his staying here any longer. His father had already written to him, urging his return home. On the morrow he decided that he would do so.

It was more than half-past twelve, but still Fred remained out on the balcony, leaning with folded arms over the carved stone balustrade, his eyes turned in the direction of Normanton.

He could not see the house, but the tall trees marked the spot where it stood. To-morrow he would be many miles away, and it was quite within the range of possibility that he might never see May again. Well, it was bot-



ter so—better for his peace of mind at any rate, he told himself. And yet he felt a strange reluctance at leaving the neighborhood.

The night was not quite dark, for there was a moon, but every now and then its light was obscured by heavy masses of cloud drifting across the sky. Angry gusts of wind swept round the house, and howled and whistled among the trees. Soon large drops of rain began to fall, and a sound of muffled thunder rolled in the distance.

He moved toward the window, but before stepping into the room turned for one last look at Normanton. With a muttered exclamation, he went quickly back to his former position.

There was a strange glow in the sky above the trees. He could not make it out. It had not been there five minutes before, or he must have seen it.

It brightened and reddened as he gazed. The windows of the hall, like fiery eyes, were visible now through the branches. What could it mean?

The rain was beating down upon his uncovered head, but still he stood there, a look of horror coming into his face, and what had at first been but a vague dread in his mind gradually growing and strengthening until it became an indisputable certainty.

Normanton Hall was on fire!

A minute later Fred was hammering away at Colonel Brereton's door.

"Hullo!" shouted the colonel, putting out his hand to feel for his revolver, which always lay ready loaded on a table near the bed. "Who's there? What's wrong?"

His thoughts instantly rushed to thieves, forgetting that, as a rule, they do not think it necessary to go through the formality of knocking before entering a room.

"Don't be alarmed, sir," said Fred, vainly endeavoring to speak calmly. "I am afraid there is something wrong at the hall. It looks to me very like a fire."

This was received by a little scream from Mrs. Brereton, who had only caught the last word.

"Fire, Fred!" she cried, excitedly. "Where?—which room?"

"Not here at all, Aunt Constance," he replied, impatiently. "At Normanton."

"Thank heaven!" she ejaculated, fervently. "Oh, dear, what a fearful fright you gave me! I thought the house was on fire."

Mrs. Brereton was not selfish as a rule, but most people would prefer that a fire should break out in their neighbor's house than their own. She was soon full of concern for May.

In an incredibly short space of time she and her husband were dressed, and the whole

household roused; and in little more than ten minutes, Fred, the colonel, and a couple of men servants had reached the water's edge, unmoored the boat and crossed the river.

The storm was raging violently. It was so dark that they could not find the path in the wood. They made their way as best they could through the wet fern, which reached knee high, and close-growing underwood; but the rain beat in their faces, and their progress was impeded by prickly bramble bushes.

Fred, always first, pushed on bravely through all, never slacking his pace, though his face and hands were scratched and bleeding. Soon he had no cause to complain of the darkness, for as he emerged from the wood, the whole neighborhood was rendered bright as day by the light from the burning building.

Flames were issuing from some of the lower windows, and wreaths of smoke curled upward toward the lowering clouds, till earth and sky alike were aglow. Hot blasts of air came toward him as he rushed up the drive, and above the howling of the storm he could hear the hissing and crackling of the fire.

The old Hall looked grand and majestic in the lurid light, its solid masonry seeming to defy the enemy which raged within its walls.

A crowd had already collected before the house.

"Are all safe? Has every one left the house?" Fred asked breathlessly of the first man he came to.

"Yes, sir, I think so. 'Twas all so sudden, there's no one seems to know nothing for certain. The fire must have broken out in half a dozen places at once. You see—"

"Where are Mr. and Mrs. Langley?" he interrupted impatiently.

The man pointed to a summer-house at the further end of the terrace.

"I think they are there with the servants, sir, sheltering from the storm. Ah, it's a bad night's work. I hope the scoundrel that did it will get what he deserves."

Fred was already off toward the summer-house without waiting to hear more. A group of half-dressed, frightened maid-servants were collected here. On the bench sat Mrs. Dexter, white and trembling, her teeth chattering with fear. She was wrapped in a large shawl, and was endeavoring to support her son, who, with a dazed expression on his dark face, was leaning back against the ivy-covered wall, apparently half-stupefied.

"I tell you I don't care who hears me," the cook, a tall, masculine-looking woman was saying in a high-pitched tone, as Fred approached. "I've known this long while that Abel Dexter was given to drink. I've seen him more than once as he is now, and I always said we'd be all burned in our beds one of these nights."



"Hold your tongue, Mary," began Mrs Dexter, with ill-assumed dignity; "how dare you speak like that? You forget yourself. My son is not well; the smoke, the fright have—"

"Is Mrs. Langley here?" said Fred, coming suddenly into their midst.

The nurse who was huddled up in a corner with nothing but a thin cloak over her night-dress, and who had been weeping hysterically over some slight burns she had received, looked up as he spoke.

"I think she and the master must have gone to the lodge, sir; there's several of the servants there, too."

"Are you sure they are out of the building?"

"Yes, sir, I went to their room myself, meaning to fetch the child; but the cot was empty and my master and mistress gone. I think they must have left the house soon after the fire broke out."

Fred was hurrying off again when he met Colonel Brereton, consternation and dismay depicted on his countenance.

"My dear Fred, this is very terrible. You hear what is said? No one seems to be able to say with any certainty where Mr. and Mrs. Langley are."

"I hear that they are at the lodge," Fred replied. "I am going there now."

"Stay; it is useless," the colonel rejoined, gravely; "they are not there, I have been questioning one of the housemaids; it is she who saw them last. She was coming down from her bedroom when she passed her master and mistress going up. There is something very mysterious in this. What could their reason be for going to the third floor at a time when they could have escaped from below with comparative safety? The girl was too much concerned at her own danger to stay to address them, but she noticed that Mrs. Langley appeared wild with fright, and was clasping the baby to her breast, while her husband's chief anxiety seemed to be to hurry her forward."

"And you stay here talking, while they are in the burning house!" cried Fred excitedly.

"My boy, there is nothing to be done; it would be madness to attempt to enter the building. You must do nothing rash. I have sent a groom off on horseback for the fire-engine; but it is five miles to the town, and—"

"Good Heavens! would you do nothing until then? The Hall may be a ruin before it comes."

He dashed off, and was soon lost in the crowd. Some men were busy splicing a couple of ladders together. It was the colonel who had ordered it to be done, with the intention of entering the house himself by one of the upper windows. He was willing to risk his

own life, but he did not mean to let Fred risk his if he could help it.

Fred, however, took matters pretty much into his own hands. No sooner was the ladder made secure and placed against the wall than he was mounting it. It reached to a passage window on the second floor. Luckily the hasp was unfastened; but as he threw up the sash he was almost choked and blinded by the dense volume of smoke which rushed through the opening. Scarcely pausing to recover his breath, he leapt down into the passage, and creeping along the floor on his hands and feet, at length reached the staircase.

Below was a roaring gulf of flame. The atmosphere was stifling. His skin was scorched, and each breath was torture, but still he advanced, all thought of self forgotten in the one hope of saving May.

When he reached the landing of the third floor he hesitated, uncertain which way to turn. It was then that a strange sound smote his ears. He could scarcely credit his senses—some one was laughing! A shout of wild, exultant laughter echoed through the house! At the same time the door of a room to his right was suddenly thrown open, and Mr. Langley appeared, half dragging, half carrying his terrified wife, who still clasped the baby convulsively to her.

"Oh, it is glorious—glorious!" cried her husband, ecstatically. "Why don't you rejoice, May, as I do, to think that our martyrdom is almost ended? Are we not about to die a martyr's death? Come, let us get out on the roof and take up our station as we should, at the top of the pile! Oh, it is a fine pile—a noble pile! See what a worthy fire I have lighted for us by which to die! Death would have stolen you from me first, and left me here with the child; but I have cheated him, for we shall go together! How could I part from you, when I had risked so much to win you? I knew to what I sacrificed you when I made you my wife; but I loved you so! No matter, our troubles will soon be over now—so soon, so very soon!"

Again he laughed discordantly. With a supreme effort, May succeeded in wrenching herself free from his grasp. Then a shrill cry of joy escaped her, for at the same moment her eyes fell on Fred.

"Save me—save my child!" she shrieked. "Oh, Fred, he does not know what he does! He would destroy us all! Do you not see?—do you not understand? *He is mad!*"

No need to say that now. Fred had understood it all only too well. There was no mistaking the vacant stare of those wildly rolling eyes. A look of baffled rage came into Mr. Langley's face when he saw Fred.

"So you have come to take me at last!" he



shouted, "but it is too late. Death was here before you, he will save me even from you. You would have deprived me of my liberty, imprisoned me, tortured me! You would have published to the world that I was mad. Well, and it is true. I am mad, mad, mad! I care not who hears me now; but all my life no one has known it—no one but Dexter and his mother. They kept the secret well—oh, very well! But still my wife found it out. Who told you?" he asked, abruptly. Then, pausing, he glanced in doubt from one to the other. When he next spoke, the words came in a hissing whisper from between his white, drawn-back lips. "Did May send for you? Was it my wife who betrayed me?"

There was murder in his eyes as they rested on the shrinking, trembling girl. Fred knew that the danger which threatened her now was more terrible than that from which he had come to save her.

He might perhaps have saved her from the fire, but what was his strength, compared with that of a madman? And they had no time to lose; already the fire was creeping along the passage, and the boards were growing hot beneath their feet.

May clung to him frantically, not realizing that she was hampering his movements, and preventing him from defending himself. He put one arm around her, and raised the other ready to ward off his antagonist. But he knew he was powerless to protect her.

It had come to this—they must die; but at least they could die together.

Mr. Langley took a step forward; he was about to spring upon them. May did not cry out, but she closed her eyes and laid her face on Fred's shoulder.

Suddenly the madman paused and looked round. There was a sound behind him—the sound of approaching footsteps! Then a shout came from the further end of the passage, and the next moment Colonel Brereton came hurrying toward them, followed by a couple of men.

"Thank Heaven, we have found you!" he cried. "This way, Mr. Langley; bring your wife. Come, Fred, there is yet time; we can escape from the roof of the billiard-room."

But as he reached them, Mr. Langley pushed Fred aside, and rushed past toward the top of the stairs. Seizing one of the blazing rails of the balusters, he stood waving it wildly above his head. Then, with a piercing shriek of mad laughter that none of them would ever forget he tossed the burning brand from him, and throwing up his arms, leaped down the awful gulf of flame that curled and cracked and roared in the abyss below.

## CHAPTER IX.

### ALL'S WELL THAT END'S WELL.

THREE months have gone by since the tragic occurrences of the last chapter. The village gossips had long since wearied of discussing the fire at Normanton, and the old house itself was being repaired and rebuilt. Little was left of it save the outer walls; but numerous workmen were already busy there, and it was said the Hall would be once more habitable by the beginning of the new year.

Mrs. Langley had been very ill for several weeks after that terrible night on which her husband had lost his life. She had been carried to the Grange, and there for some time had lain between life and death. As soon as she was able to think of anything, she had asked for her baby.

It had died many days before; but they hesitated to tell her the truth. The child had always been sickly and ailing, and the exposure on the night of the fire brought on an inflammation from which it never recovered. It lingered for a few days, seldom crying as other babies would have done, but just lying passively in its cot, with a pitiful expression of suffering and endurance on its strangely old-looking little face. Then it had passed away, almost without a moan. May received the news better than they could have hoped. She heard all they had to say, and then, turning to the wall, shed a few silent tears.

When the child was born she had almost prayed it might die; but since then it had grown very dear to her. She had learned to love the little solemn face, so unlike the faces of other children. And yet there had been times when she had turned from it in fear; for the large eyes would be raised to hers with a look in them so painfully like its father, that it made her tremble with a dread foreboding.

How could she mourn its loss when she knew the terrible fate which awaited it? There is little doubt, had it lived, that it would later on have developed the same fatal symptoms of madness as those to which Mr. Langley had been subject.

When she was well enough to be moved, her uncle came to fetch her, and she went back with him to her old home. Mr. Sandford had aged greatly since she had seen him last, and there were lines about the kind old face which were not caused by time alone. May never divined how much he had missed her, until she saw the change which her absence had caused in him.

Should she ever be able to make up to him for what she had made him suffer? She must never leave him again—never! She and uncle Gregory and old Patience would go on living



the quiet, peaceful life they had lived long ago.

But even as she told herself this, she knew it could never be quite the same again. She had been a child then, happy and thoughtless, without a care in the world; now, she was a woman saddened and aged by sorrow. When she regarded herself in the little mirror, which had in the old days so often reflected her smiling, girlish face, she believed even her beauty was a thing of the past. Yet, had she known it, there was an added charm in the mournful depths of her eyes that had been wanting before, and a new beauty in the pathetic droop of the sensitive mouth.

It was evening now. Without, the shadows of the night were spreading over the dreary landscape; a damp mist hung over everything; the brown and yellow leaves were fast falling from the trees and lying thickly on the garden paths.

The old gardener, who had been endeavoring to collect them, shook his head hopelessly as he saw fresh showers of them come fluttering down at every gust of wind as fast as he had raked them away.

He got together his tools presently and moved toward the house, glad to exchange the damp atmosphere of the garden for the comfortable warmth of the kitchen.

Within, in the library, the light from the leaping flames of a wood fire cast a ruddy glow around, making the gilt frames of the pictures on the walls, and the many brass nails in the bookcases, shine and glitter. It smiled up into Uncle Gregory's kindly face, and rested tenderly on May's bowed head, brightening the coils of dark hair.

She had been reading aloud until it grew too dusk; now she sat on a stool at the old man's feet, one hand lying listlessly across the open book.

Both were busy with their own thoughts; so preoccupied that they did not hear a stealthy tread on the path outside, nor see a pale face pressed close to the window-pane, gazing yearningly, longingly, hopelessly into the comfortable room.

By and by May raised her head and looked up with a sigh.

"Uncle Gregory," she said, "there are one or two things I want you to tell me. I have never asked you anything about—about Normanton since I have been here."

"No, my dear, and I have not liked to be the first to mention it for fear of paining you; but it is better that you should know all. The property does not belong to you now; it has passed into other hands."

"I am glad," she replied, musingly; "I could never have lived there. Had it been mine I should have sold it. But I did not ex-

pect to have Normanton, for I knew Duke had made a will leaving it to Abel Dexter; he confessed this to me only the day before the fire. I understood afterward what he meant, when he added that Dexter should not have the hall if he had the property."

She paused, shuddering.

"But he has neither the one nor the other," interrupted Mr. Sandford. "Mr. Langley's cousin is the heir. The will was valueless—do you not understand?"

He hesitated, not knowing how to explain.

"You mean that no will made by any one in my husband's state of health could be legal." She spoke unfalteringly though with an effort. "And so Dexter and his mother will have nothing, though they planned and schemed and made so sure of all. Oh, uncle Gregory, they have been justly punished! Hark! What is that?"

A low, wailing cry came from the garden. She rose hastily and went toward the window. It was almost dark now; but a ray of light from within stretched across the path and showed her something lying there—the form of a woman.

She went out, calling to the servants to follow her.

In a few minutes they brought the stranger into the hall, and the lamp-light fell upon her. Then May, who had been tenderly supporting her, started back with a cry. It was Mrs. Dexter!

Yes, it was the same woman, though the cheeks were gaunt and hollow from hunger and privation; and the dark eyes, so bold and defiant of old, were now gazing up into hers imploringly.

"For Heaven's sake give me food!" the woman cried faintly. "I am starving!"

May did not hesitate even for a moment. As those beseeching, hopeless tones fell upon her ears, she forgot the many indignities she had endured at her hands—forgot all that this woman had made her suffer; forgot everything, save that a human being was ill and in want, and that it was in her power to help her.

Half an hour later, Mrs. Dexter was in bed, enjoying that perfect rest which is so grateful after long fatigue. She had walked the ten long miles from the city to find May. In her dire distress there had been no one to whom she could look for help, no one to whom she dared apply with any hope of success, but the girl she had so cruelly wronged.

May saw that she had all that was necessary, and then left her, thinking she might sleep. But when, some hours later, she returned, Mrs. Dexter was still awake. There were traces of tears on her face and her cheeks were flushed.

"I am glad you have come," she began, ex-



citedly. "I could not have slept until I had spoken to you. I want you to say you forgive me. I have been thinking of things as I lay here alone. I have so often thought of them of late—so often! I never doubted that you would give me food, and perhaps a lodging for the night; but I did not expect you would seem sorry for me. You said awhile ago, when I was by the window, that I had been justly punished, but you never guessed how bitter my punishment really is. It was for Abel that I sinned—for him that I was ready to sin even more. And he has left me!—left me to starve—me, his mother!"

"Do not speak of these things now," urged May. "You will make yourself ill. Try and go to sleep; to-morrow, if you wish it, you shall tell me more."

"No, no! I must speak—it relieves me; I have kept silent so long. I could have forgiven him if he had written or given me something to keep me from the workhouse; but he has gone out West without one word, taking with him all that had taken us so many years to scrape together. He has not Normanton, but he will be rich—yes, rich—while I am a beggar! I taught him to think only of himself, and he learned the lesson well. Oh, my boy! my boy! I was so proud of him—so proud of his handsome face and gentlemanly ways. I should have been content to stand aside when he was master of Normanton if he would have had it so. It would have been enough for me to have seen him in his right place—for it was his right place—and now it has come to this?"

She half-raised herself upon one arm, and pushed back the hair from her hot brow.

May was silent, thinking her mind wandered, but it was not so.

"Look at me," she went on, excitedly. "You would not think now that I had ever been beautiful? No, I know you would not; but it is true. I was so beautiful that Mr. Langley fell in love with me and promised to marry me, though I was but his sister's maid."

"You do not know what you are saying," interrupted May, indignantly. "I will not believe it."

"Oh, I don't mean your husband; I am speaking of his father. He was going abroad for some months; but he promised that when he returned he would make me his wife and acknowledge my boy. I was a fool, believed him, trusted him, and waited. When he did return he brought his wife with him. A dark, handsome Italian woman she was. How I hated her! Yet I made no sign; and when he came to me with money and gifts, to purchase my silence, I took them and promised to hold my tongue; but to myself I swore that I would be revenged. One day he came to me and begged

that I would go and nurse his wife. She was not liked in the neighborhood, and had few friends. He paid me handsomely, and I went. It did not take me long to discover what it was that had made Mr. Langley look so haggard and unhappy of late, and why he had allowed his wife to go so little into society. She was mad! Rational enough at times, but at others a raving lunatic. In one of her most violent fits her son was born—my boy's half-brother!"

May covered her face with her hands, and shuddered convulsively.

It was this terrible malady which 'Duke had inherited.

"Go on," she murmured faintly.

"There is not much more to say," Mrs. Dexter said, with a weary sigh. "Mrs. Langley died a few years after. She was drowned. People thought it an accident at the time, but I knew better; I knew it was suicide. Her husband sent for me, and made me promise never to leave his son. You may guess why; I alone knew his secret.

"With so much power in my hands, no wonder I abused the trust. I taught the boy to fear me. I encouraged him to believe that if his cousin, the next heir, knew of his insanity he would have him confined in an asylum. He lived in perpetual dread of this, till at last it became a mania. Abel and I lost no opportunity of talking of the horrors which took place in madhouses, and of the tortures he would have to endure if he were sent there.

"This went on until old Mr. Langley died, and Marmaduke became his heir. It was for this we had waited. We forced him to make a will leaving everything to Abel. It was while my son was away at Normanton, having the Hall made ready to receive us, that Mr. Langley made your acquaintance, and married you."

"I know the rest," said May, sadly.

"No, no; you do not. You do not know that we were so afraid of his betraying himself at last and telling the truth for your sake, that we had determined to give him an opportunity of destroying himself. We knew in his paroxysms of madness the desire of self-destruction was always strong, and we decided to leave open the door of the room in which, at those times, he was confined, never doubting that he would take advantage of it, and perhaps drown himself, as his mother had done. Then Abel would have had at last what should have been his all along.

"But now he is gone, and I feel I shall never see my boy again. And from whom do you think I heard that he had left the East? It was Bess Pearson that told me."

"Then it is true what was said—it was was through your son that Bess left her home?"



"Yes; I met her in New York some weeks ago. He had deserted her, too. But what could she expect? Did she think a gentleman like my Abel would ever stoop to marry such as she? She was poor—very poor, for the little money he had left with her was spent long ago. She was earning a few cents a day selling flowers. I had disliked the girl before, and she had hated me for my pride; but we clung together in our common misery, and she shared her hardly-earned crust with me.

"For shame's sake she would not go home to her grandmother; she dared not face her old friends. But poverty and hunger soon brought down her pride; she started for Normanton yesterday morning to walk all the way, and beg her food on the road, for she had no money. Then, when I was alone, I could think of no one who would give me even a piece of bread but you, and so I came here.

"There! I have told you all. Perhaps I have been a fool for my pains; for now, no doubt, you will turn me away, and there will be nothing left for me but the workhouse. Good Heavens, the workhouse! And I thought to be mistress of Normanton!"

But May did not turn her away; she let her stay until she had gained strength, and then she put her in the way of some honest employment that was suited to her. But Mrs. Dexter had lived so long for her son that she did not even care to try to live without him; she would not want anything very much longer.

For some months Mrs. Langley's uneventful life went on, without one single incident to break the monotony. She was growing just a little weary of the days so much like each other, and was beginning to ask herself in some dismay if it would be always like this.

Kate Dunstable came to stop with her in the spring. No one could be dull with Kate, so the girls were happy enough together; but Kate would be going away soon, and then the dreary routine would begin again. They tacitly agreed not to mention the past, so the dark page of May's brief married life was not turned.

There was another subject on which Kate kept a marked silence, which did not please May so well. This was the sayings and doings of her brother Fred. Only once did she vol-

untarily speak of him—it was two days before she left.

May was sitting half in and half out of the open window, her lap full of purple and white violets and ferns, which she was arranging into a bouquet. Every now and then she glanced furtively across at her friend, who was writing at a little table at the further end of the room.

"Kate," she said, presently, "I can see you are troubling about something. What is it?"

Kate laid down her pen with a sigh, and rested her head on her hand.

"I am troubled," she replied, sadly. "It is about Fred. He is talking of leaving us all, and going to Australia. We have an uncle there, and he thinks of joining him for a year or two."

"To Australia!" echoed May, with a sinking at the heart. "Oh, Kate, you must not let him go!"

"I fear nothing I can say would make much difference," she rejoined. "He is reckless and unsettled. There is only one woman in the whole world who can speak the word that would keep him."

"And who is that?" May asked, faintly, without looking up.

She had only seen Fred two or three times since that dreadful night, when they had been ready to face death together, and on each occasion he had seemed to her cold and distant.

"Yourself, dear. But, May, do not look so grieved. It is not your fault that you can not love him. We will not speak of it again."

Not speak of it again! May bent her head low down over her flowers, her heart beating wildly. What could she do? She could not tell him that she loved him before he asked her, and yet, if she made no sign, he would go away and perhaps she might never see him again.

Kate had taken up her pen again, and was finishing her letter. Soon it would be folded and sealed. If she would speak, it must be now.

She rose tremblingly, and crossing the room, went behind Kate's chair, and putting her arms round her friend's neck, laid her burning cheek against hers.

"Kate," she whispered, softly, "tell him—tell him not to go."



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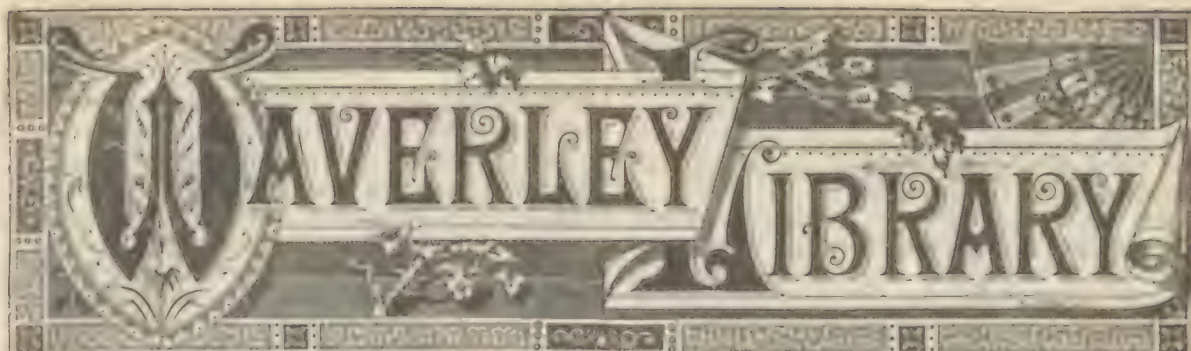
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"A PENNY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS, MISS ERLESCOMBE."

## OUTWITTED BY HERSELF;

Or, A MOTHER'S SCHEME.

BY ARABELLA SOUTHWORTH.

### CHAPTER I.

#### A PASSING STRANGER.

THE afternoon sun was shining upon the lawn, the river was running tranquilly below it, and

under the great oak tree was gathered what might be taken for the happiest of family parties. The rubicund gentlemanly pater-familias, portly and good-natured, reclined in his easy chair, with a paper on his knee and a cup of tea beside him. His handsome wife, well-dressed and smiling, sat near him, with Kensington work in her hand; while his only daughter, young and beautiful, presided over the pretty lunch table with its silver service; and near her stood a trusted friend of the



family, a grave, middle-aged, professional-looking man, who had taken a short holiday from the whirl of city life to enjoy the country air and hospitality of Elm Grove.

All look peaceful and bright; each one seemed ignorant of such a thing as care or trouble. What a pity it is that appearances cannot be relied on—that beneath the scene of calmest beauty may slumber a volcano, and a skeleton repose in the most attractive-looking cupboard.

"Winnie, dear," said Mrs. Erlescombe, "what are you going to do this evening?"

Winnie started a little when spoken to, and brought her blue eyes back from a far-away, thoughtful glance across the river; the friend of the family started too, and turned his gaze from the sweet girlish face it had been lingering upon for longer than its owner knew.

"I am going to drive into Blyton, I think," said Winnie, rising. "I'll match your silks for you if you like, mother."

"I dare say Mr. Hampton will go and take care of you." The lady mother smiled upon the friend of the family. "You don't object to drive in a *tiny* pony-phaeton, do you, Mr. Hampton?"

"I object to nothing in Miss Winnie's society!" replied Mr. Hampton, rising with alacrity, and a labored effort at gallantry.

"I object to being called Miss Winnie," pouted the young lady, turning toward the house; "I have told you that ever so many times!"

"I should like to call you Winnie, without the formal prefix," said he, speaking quite in a low and impressive tone.

"Then I should object to you," she laughed.

"Cruel fair one!—how am I to please you?"

"Oh, in twenty ways, if you want to do so. I never discovered your anxiety to distinguish yourself in this way before."

"You never permit me to give vent to my feelings!"—reproachfully. "You snub and throw cold water upon every attempt I make to express my heartfelt sentiments—"

"If you are trying to express your heartfelt sentiments," interrupted she, "each time you call me Miss Winnie, I always shall snub you. I like to have my proper title—Miss Erlescombe. Please remember, my title! Miss Winnie reminds me of a servant!"—scornfully.

"I am your servant—your humble, devoted servant!" returned he, boldly.

"If you talk like this going up to the town, I shall overturn you," raising her bewitching, saucy eyes to his face with a smile; "I shall, really!"

"You have already overturned my every thought and resolution. You have overturned my mind, my heart, and its peace, its safety," whispered he. "The same treatment applied

to my body, will be of little comparative consequence."

"But you won't like it when it comes to your body, all the same though. Hearts and minds, and—what is it you said?—resolutions—what are they, pray?—can stand a good many more accidents, than flesh and bones. Now I come to think of it, Mr. Hampton, I am not at all sure that you will like my pony-phaeton. Consider the matter before you get in. Do you mind doubling up your limbs like a lobster's?"

"Not in the least. I shall enjoy it."

"It is an awfully little carriage. There really is hardly room for two, and you are not as small as you might be," said she, surveying him doubtfully.

"I feel as small as it is possible for a man to do always in your company, Miss Erlescombe, I assure you."

"That is all very well, but your feelings are not the point. It is the look of the thing I am considering. I don't want to drive a person who hangs over the sides. He looks untidy. And then, if we do get you packed in the carriage, it would not be fair to let you start without warning you of the steed's peculiarities. He runs away sometimes—yes, very fast; and when he runs he falls down, and the features of the people he runs away with get smashed. Do you mind having your features disfigured?"

Mr. Hampton's grave, hard features relaxed into a smile.

"How long have you had this animal with these dangerous proclivities? I should feel inclined to dispose of him and buy a sounder one."

She looked at him in pretty, affected indignation.

"How like a man! Dispose of a creature because he is unfortunate! I have not had Brownie long, but I have become so inseparably attached to him that I am sure I am not going to dispose of him, Mr. Hampton, as you term it, just because he can't always stand up. There may come a day when you are unfortunate enough to fall."

"A very likely day, indeed, I should say," he ejaculated.

"Well, and shall you expect to be disposed of then?"—laughing.

"It is hardly an analogous case. Your pony runs away, too, I thought you said."

"So I did, but that is merely his play; and he has only those two little bad points, while his good ones are innumerable. At any rate, I am so attached to the darling that I would not dispose of him, Mr. Hampton if he smashed—all my friends' features,"—mischievously.

"We can bear accidents to our friends phil-

—with a



osophically," moralized her companion. "Do you soon become attached to animals and men, Miss Erlescombe?"

"I love animals at first sight, as a rule; but as for men,"—with a pretty grimace—"I have to put up with seeing them about and all that, you know; but to become attached to any of them must be an impossibility for any one, I should say. There is nothing in them to become attached to—at least, as far as my experience goes,"—modestly.

"That is scarcely the general opinion of your sex," he returned, grimly.

"I am not giving you general opinions; I am giving you only my own private and particular ones," rejoined she, saucily.

He stopped her, as she would have tripped past him up the stairs.

"You talk of men," said he, speaking in a compressed kind of earnestness, at which she struggled hard not to laugh; "but if you could form an attachment to only one member of my unfortunate sex, it would be as much as I should require or ask of you."

"That is very good and thoughtful of you, I am sure. I would do a great deal to please a friend of papa's like you, Mr. Hampton. I will try if I can do even so much as that for your sake, some day." And she ran upstairs, leaving her merry voice ringing in his ear.

When she came down again she looked more enchanting than ever. Over her white dress and its creamy lace trimmings she wore a fluffy lace cape, against which her golden-brown hair shone sleek and bright. She had put on a huge Gainsborough hat, which shaded one side of her pretty face, but coquettishly exposed the broad, low brow, and soft pink cheek, and darkly-lashed eye on the other; one little rosebud peeped out from the snowy ostrich feathers, in which the hat was smothered; and she was drawing on gloves that had eight buttons each at least.

Mr. Hampton stepped forward to fasten them for her, or attempt to do so, but he proved clumsy and slow.

"All men are clumsy and slow," remarked she, calmly; "at least, as far as my experience is concerned. Don't you think so?"

"I think your experience is very imperfect in comparison with what it will be," said he.

"What it will be! I wonder what it will be before we get home again?"

They had started, and were skimming along a picture of a country road, he holding the reins and she finishing her gloves.

"Thank you; I will take the reins now. You are sure you are all in the carriage, not trailing behind or anything? I mean you are comfortable?"

"I am more than comfortable—I am happy!"—with a deep breath.

"You said that as if you were not always so,"—with a sudden kindly glance.

"Lately I have not been, I own."

"Why?" Then hurriedly, "I beg your pardon; I did not mean to be inquisitive."

"I wish I dare tell you why. Do you think I dare?"

"I don't know how much courage you have; but I am sure you have not time to tell anything before we get into Blyton," returned she, coloring a little, more from his tone than from a suspicion of what he might be going to say. "How beautifully Brownie is going now, is he not?"

"Miss Erlescombe, hear me for one moment."

"There, Mr. Hampton! you will distract my thoughts from my business—driving. Brownie was as nearly as anything on his nose just now. I feel a sort of responsibility for your features, you know. If I broke the nose of papa's broker, why, I should never forgive myself, even were it his own fault for distracting my attention needlessly."

"Will you allow me to get out here for a minute?" asked he, in a deeply-offended tone, as they at that moment passed a book-store, "I will not detain you long."

"Oh, pray don't hurry yourself! Musty old stock reports is it you are in quest of? I'll drive on and get mother's silks, and then come back for you. You need be in no hurry, really."

She departed to the fancy store, and returned before Mr. Hampton had emerged again; but as the frisky little pony waited at the curb-stone, with his head turned homeward, a cumbrous engine came, with unearthly noise, and a long train of freight cars behind it, down a side street. The smoke, the sound, the apparition, were more than Brownie could stand. In an instant, before the driver was aware of his intention, he had got his head well down from under her control, and was off, with the bit between his teeth, tearing as for dear life, down the quiet street and into the country, toward the stable he loved so well. Winnie sat perfectly still, though her lips grew white, and she cast one frightened glance around, as she dashed into the narrow road. If Brownie kept straight in his wild course, and avoided the ditches of his own free will, and they met nothing, all might end well. But, alas! as they reached the narrowest part of the pretty road, where, with nicest care and judgment, two vehicles could only just pass between the high banks, she saw advancing a great old-fashioned wagon and horses. No room for it to turn. No time for anything but a wild longing for a stronger hand than her own—a wild prayer, and a wild resignation to what must happen.

Then from out the bushes, or from out the



bank, or from some unexpected and most happy spot, a stranger at that moment sprung, seized the naughty little pony's head in a grasp whose muscle was equal to the occasion, and the danger was averted. The panting pony stopped, and she stood face to face with an unknown man, who had undoubtedly saved her life. Just for a moment she felt as if she must faint, but the color came rushing into her cheeks as she encountered the dark, handsome glance of the stranger, and she laughed.

"I am so deeply, truly thankful to you," said she, lifting two of the most grateful and bluest eyes he had ever seen. "But I can't help laughing, because it is so romantic, so odd, so book-like, that you should come forth to save me at the exact instant, like this. You are just—just the exact—just the very type of—"

"Yes?" he interposed, with an interested bend forward as she paused.

"Type of a hero of romance," she was going to say; "the exact copy of the handsome knight-errant who proverbially, in romance, appears at the critical moment to rescue a forlorn damsel. But, somehow, as she surveyed the stalwart figure (over six feet high), the unmistakably gentlemanly appearance, the dark, handsome face of that knight; above all, as she met his amused glance, the first fit of shyness her life had ever known seized Miss Winnie, and her ready flow of nonsense deserted her.

"I mean in real life it would generally have been an old man with a basket, or a horrid boy, or a foolish woman who would have appeared for my deliverance, you know," stammered she.

"Neither of those three specimens would have had strength to deliver you, I fear," laughed he. "This strong little beast nearly knocked me down," patting the wicked Brownie.

"You are very strong!" said Winnie; after which flattering remark she went round in some confusion and patted Brownie's other side, and the stranger took the opportunity of steadily regarding her.

She looked up, and caught him in the act; and because of that act, or because of the unmistakable admiration with which his eyes had become filled, she blushed furiously, and got into the phaeton again.

"I don't like you to drive home by yourself," said he, as if he had some suddenly-acquired right to direct her proceedings. "This little brute is not to be trusted. Have you far to go?" looking affectionately at the vacant seat in her carriage.

"Only to Elm Grove—half a mile, perhaps," replied Winnie, passing over the unkindness of the rides bestowed upon her darling pony, and flitting with the reins.

"I wish you would trust me to escort you there. My name is Clyde Douglas," with a bow. "I am down here for a few days' fishing. I am awfully glad I just happened to be walking down this road at the right moment!"

"It was a lucky thing," said Winnie. "But, Mr. Douglas, I—I don't like to trouble you any further, and"—with a sudden remembrance of Mr. Hampton—"I have an escort somewhere about," looking behind her. "I forgot him. I wonder what has become of him?" feeling vexed with poor, innocent Mr. Hampton.

"The escort I left behind me?" quoted Mr. Douglas amusedly. "May I escort you back to look for him? You will know him when you see him, won't you?"

"He is not a laughing matter," smiled Winnie. "He is a heavy, stern reality—so heavy that I believe it was delight at getting rid of him that made Brownie play this trick of naughtiness. Was not it darling, eh?" she said to the pony.

"If he inspires Brownie with tricks, let us not seek for him. I am more worthy than he. Let me take his place."

And Clyde Douglas spoke with the utmost confidence.

"I could not doubt your worthiness," laughed the girl. "But I believe—Brownie and I believe—you are not one bit less heavy than the Mr. Hampton we have lost."

"Bodily or conversationally?" he asked, insinuatingly. "I ask because I noticed you driving the lost escort up to Blyton half an hour ago, and he seemed to me—He is not a particular friend of yours, is he?"

"He is my father's broker."

"Exactly. Then I may mention that his companionship appeared, to a passing observer, to have some weight about it—the weight of brains, probably,"—with a smile that fascinated Winnie, since it lighted up his countenance.

"He is heavy," she sighed, drawing aside to make room for Mr. Douglas to enter the carriage. "But he is so worthy—the friend of our whole family,"—repentantly.

"Worth weighs. For that reason Brownie will not find me too much. I have no family friendships intrusted to me."

"Where did you see us as we went into Blyton?" asked Miss Erlescombe, curiously. "I never noticed you, I am quite sure!"—with emphasis.

"You were too engrossed with Mr. Hampton. I noticed you!"

But he forbore to mention that because of that notice he had been found in this road. Perhaps he did not think it advisable to confess how one passing glance at her had interested him to such an extent that he had made it his business to find out her name and place



of abode, after which he proceeded to haunt her return path to make sure of another glimpse of the face that had charmed him strangely. But although she knew it not, it was because she was young and pretty that Winifred Erlescombe drove a fascinating stranger home to her gates, and left the friend of her family to toil on foot and arrive late for dinner.

## CHAPTER II.

### WHO IS HE?

"My dear, is not this a very extraordinary thing?"—Mr. Erlescombe burst fussily into his wife's dressing-room as her maid was putting the finishing touches to her toilet for dinner—"a most remarkable thing! The happiest escape I ever heard of! You are aware of what has just happened, of course?"

"Of course you invariably jump to a wrong conclusion, Robert!" returned the lady, coldly. "But I am aware that it is impossible to hear from you any thing in any way that any human being can understand! How you can be so excited and incoherent at your age—"

"How on earth can I be excited and incoherent at anybody else's age?" argued her better-half, annoyed.

"Well, well,"—leniently. "You say something has happened? You can go, Mary," turning to the maid.

"Your daughter—our daughter, Winnie, you know, has just been saved from a fearful death—from being smashed to pieces by one of those confounded country teams. I declare I will stir the sheriff up about it; I have no doubt the fellow was asleep on the seat! And she has driven him home, a fine young man, a most taking young man, as I am sure you will pronounce when you see him, Susan; and, my dear," coming meekly a little nearer, "I wish you would invite him to dinner! There is no question about our being most deeply indebted to him, and I would not appear inhospitable for worlds!"

"You would not appear intelligible, you mean! Winnie has driven home a man who was asleep on a seat and got crushed under a wagon? Pray, how can he eat any dinner?"

"My dear, you comprehend so slowly! Winnie has driven home the young man who saved her from being crushed to death. Brownie bolted, and they met a wagon, and this young stranger sprung out and checked the pony."

"How do you know he did not startle it at first? You are but a baby in the ways of the world, Robert."

"Indeed? I flatter myself—" began her injured spouse pulling up his collar.

But the better-half went calmly on: "Winnie has driven home a young man, has she? Then, pray, where is Mr. Hampton, and who is this young man? Let me look at him!"—walking to the window, and raising her eye-glasses.

"'Pon my soul! I forgot all about Hampton!" said Mr. Erlescombe. "I should think the wagon did not go over him, or they would have mentioned it. There they are, you see, standing by the phaeton, just below there. Fine young fellow, isn't he? I don't know that I ever saw one better built; and I like his way of speaking, too!"

"A most impudent young man!" said Mrs. Erlescombe, regarding him steadily. "Detaining my daughter at her hall-door when she ought to be dressing for dinner! I never saw a young man I thought more suspicious and objectionable-looking at first sight, I must say! Robert, go down and send him about his business!"—with a commanding wave of her hand.

"My dear, I—er—in fact. I have mentioned something about dinner," objected Mr. Erlescombe meekly.

"Then I shall go down and mention something *not* about dinner. A stranger who sprung out of a wagon!"

"No, my dear Susan; that is a mistake on your part. So far as I could gather, he had nothing to do with the wagon; he came out from the bushes at the side of the road."

"The bushes or the ditch," returned she, in grand contempt, "it is all the same! An adventurer, a horse-stealer! He is not likely to be asked to dine with me and my daughter!"—raising her cap.

"Why, you don't know a gentleman when you see one!" retorted her husband, growing exasperated.

"Thanks! I know what is wise, and prudent, and safe when you have daughters under your care. Has this young man money or family to boast of, Robert?"

"My dear, how could I ask those personal questions in a two minutes' interview?"

"You had no business to have an interview with a man of whose position and prospects you knew nothing. Men really are the most trying, unreasonable animals on the face of the earth!" pronounced the lady, preparing to descend, with fan, gloves and handkerchief in battle array.

"Except women!" muttered her better-half.

"Except some women, certainly! That daughter of yours is behaving now in the most trying, reprehensible manner—looking at that adventurer as if she were quite pleased with him, I declare! Robert, come down and support me!" sweeping forward. "Remember Mr. Hampton!"

"I don't think you need much support," said



the henpecked husband, following her slowly; and he muttered, in a lower key, "Confound Hampton! I never have the ghost of a chance of forgetting him!"

Mrs. Erlescombe, with the bearing of a queen, and with her battle accouterments—viz., fan, handkerchief and gloves—imposingly held, swept up to the open front door, and said, in the most affectionate of voices, "Winnie, dear, where have you left Mr. Hampton?"

Winnie turned a glowing face from the pony's head, on the other side of which Clyde Douglas stood, and replied, "Oh, I lost him on the road. Mother, let me introduce Mr. Douglas to you. He just came—"

"May I ask who introduced him to you, dear?" the mother said, gently, acknowledging Douglas's bow with the shade of a frozen one.

"A happy circumstance, or rather what might have proved a fatal accident to your daughter!" said the young stranger, with his frank, charming air and manly voice.

"I should have been killed, mother, to a dead certainty!" said Winnie, in a low, intense tone.

"Tut, tut! these things always get exaggerated," replied the lady, with an air of superb calmness. "As it is growing late, I do not think we need detain Mr. Dunwash any longer. I am sure we are greatly obliged to him for being so attentive. The groom shall just drive this pony back and look for dear Mr. Hampton," ringing the stable bell.

"Mother!" said Winnie, in an imploring whisper.

"Ah, dear, yes; thanks for reminding me. Mr. Duplex, if you care for it, you are quite welcome to a lift in this carriage as far as ever you wish to go. You are living somewhere about here, I suppose?"—with an airy wave of her hand and its flashing rings.

"I am staying at Blyton for a few days, fishing. You are very kind, Mrs. Erlescombe; but I won't trouble this poor little pony any further, thank you. I like walking," said Douglas, rather as if he were amused at than angered by the lady's contemptuous coldness.

"You are used to a great deal of walking, I dare say?" answered she, condescendingly. "Winnie, my love," with a meaning glance at her daughter, "you know your papa's aversion to any one's keeping dinner waiting. Mr. Duplex, I am sure will excuse us,"—giving another infinitesimal bend of her stately body.

"Mother, he *saved my life!*" whispered the girl, agitatedly.

"My love, you are excited, and so given to exaggeration. Now where can dear Mr. Hampton be, I wonder? He so dislikes to be hurried in dressing for dinner. Winnie, just ring the bell for Marks, will you, and I will give orders to have the dinner put back for a quarter of an hour."

But Miss Erlescombe broke from her mother's majestic hand, and going back to the stranger, put her own in his.

"Mr. Douglas," said she, raising the sweetest, truest, most earnest eyes he had ever seen, "I thank you over and over again for your noble courage and kindness this afternoon, and I only hope I shall see you soon again to say more of the gratitude I feel. Shall I?"

"It lies in your hands," he said, in a low tone, while she in her turn thought that she had never met with eyes she admired so much as his. "There is nothing in this world I should like so much as to see you again."

"Winnie!" said her mother, in a voice which spoke volumes.

And with cheeks a little pinker than usual, Miss Erlescombe followed her mother into the hall.

"Have you seen the view from the summer-house by moonlight?" Mrs. Erlescombe suddenly asked Mr. Hampton, as they sat in the drawing-room after dinner. "The moon is so bright just now it reminded me of it, and I thought perhaps dear Winnie would like to take you to see it. Should you catch cold, my child, if you ran there and back, do you think?"

"Mr. Hampton can't run," observed Winnie, calmly. "He proved as much by the length of time it took him this afternoon to get from that book store home. Mr. Hampton, I should have been smashed a dozen times if I had depended upon you as my cavalier."

Mr. Hampton rose and approached the girl, who stood in a trailing mauve silk gown, with bare arms and neck, and sprays of heliotrope in her hair, looking, if possible, a little prettier than she had done in the afternoon.

"Will you show me this view by moonlight?" he asked, in a low, eager tone.

"Certainly. Have you got overshoes, though, and everything?"

"I don't want them."

"Oh, excuse me, at your age you can't be too careful. Why, I knew an old gentleman once who only just went across the lawn when the dew was falling, and—"

"Winnie!" said her mother, angrily; and the girl laughed as she went into the hall.

"Do I appear so very ancient to you?" inquired Mr. Hampton in a suppressed manner, as side by side they went out of the lamp-light and into the silvery world the moon was making enchanting.

"Oh, very!" said she, readily. "Really, I confuse you with Mr. Methuselah, and the 'Ancient Mariner,' and all those good people sometimes."

"There they go, Robert," murmured Mrs. Erlescombe, standing at the window. "I do hope they'll get something settled. Really, if he does not seize this chance, it is unpardonable. I cannot bear this suspense and planning



much longer, and you are a perfect clog instead of a help. Bless the man! he is asleep—asleep as if no ruin hung over his head like a hair, which his daughter may cut at any moment. He is always asleep when we have any affairs of importance to discuss.”

“The letters, ma’am,” said a servant, opening the door, and approaching with a salver. “And James found this in Miss Erlescombe’s carriage, ma’am, and thinks that either Mr. Hampton or the strange young gentleman must have dropped it there this afternoon. It was not there this morning.”

“Give it to me,” said the lady, taking from the man an eye-glass set in gold and attached to a broken string. She turned it to the light, and there above the initials C. D. was engraved on the gold a coat of arms. She took it close to the candle to make sure, and her face was a study as she turned it about and inspected it.

“A coat of arms!” she gasped. “Is it possible? It must have dropped from that strange young man! Mr. Hampton does not wear an eye-glass. A coat of arms!”

In her bewilderment she turned over the letters. One was for herself and one for her daughter, and she opened her daughter’s first. It was only addressed in a schoolfellow’s girlish hand; but Mrs. Erlescombe deemed it prudent to keep an eye upon her daughter’s correspondence. In her mental perplexity, she opened the envelope and read as follows:

“DARLING WINNIE:—Such a lark! I must tell you! There is an awful aristocratic fellow in your neighborhood, all wrapped up in disguises, traveling *in-og*, you know. He is as rich as a Rothschild and as handsome as Apollo, and his name it is Claude Dunhaven. I know him slightly, and I have just heard that he is going to have a few days’ fishing at Blyton under the name of somebody else—pretending to be somebody ordinary, you know; but you can’t mistake him—he’s so awfully handsome! Tall, dark, splendid eyes, and a dark mustache! And I want you to haunt your lanes or river until you meet him, and then get introduced in some romantic way. Tumble into the river (when you have not your best clothes on), and let him pull you out! He is worth the trouble.

“You know we always said at school you were to marry a millionaire, and I was to marry his poor cousin and live at your gates. Well, I am in love with Mr. Dunhaven’s cousin, and that is how I know of his proceedings. He is awfully romantic, and does these queer, mysterious, romantic little things every now and again. His object in life is to find some girl in love with him who does not care about his money or position, you know, and you are exactly the girl to suit him, *ma chere*. Don’t tell your mother a word, because she is such an old maneuverer, if you don’t mind my saying so, and would just frighten him away. I judge him by his cousin.

“Don’t you pretend to know a word of this, either. Treat him as if he were just what he pretends to be; but make his acquaintance in some way, and let me know the result. If he is anything like his cousin—and some people say he is nicer, but they are stupid, that think too much of filthy lucre—oh, you will be a lucky girl! Your ever affectionate friend,

“EVA.

“P. S.—He came down your way yesterday. He may not stop long, so make haste, dear. Find him out in some way or other for the sake of matrimony.”

Mrs. Erlescombe stood perfectly still until she had finished reading that gushing epistle three times, and had scrutinized the eye-glass in every possible way four times; then she hurriedly hid away both glass and letter deep in her pocket, and marching to the window, elevated her shrill voice and called, “Winnifred!”

The sound went traveling through the moonlight and over the shrubbery, and reached Winnie just as Mr. Hampton was holding her hand in a tremulous, clammy way, and saying, “Miss Erlescombe, you must give me your serious attention for one moment now.”

“Look at the view!” said Winnie.

“I prefer to look at you. You must listen to me now.”

“But I can’t, you see, for my mamma is calling me. I will do the next best thing I can for you, Mr. Hampton—I will race you back to the house. One, two, three, and off! If you can run, now is your time to catch me.”

She was speeding away, light and bright as a bird.

“Guide me back,” he implored. “I shall lose my way.”

“Mr. Hampton, that is trying to obtain assistance under false pretenses. Well, come along, then, as fast as you can toddle—I beg your pardon, I mean walk. I will sing you a touching song about the owl and the pussy-cat as soon as I get indoors.”

She had enthralled him completely. Her bright beauty and her winning gayety made him utterly indifferent to her carelessness of his feelings and the total lack of respect and deference in her manner to him. Because she cared so little for him, he cared far more than she dreamed for her.

He came in submissive and silent, the elderly, clever, wealthy, potential man of business, and stood at the girl’s side as she sung random songs in a sweet and well trained voice.

Mrs. Erlescombe took the opportunity to march across to her husband, whom the sound of the piano had awaked.

“Robert, I have been thinking the matter over, and it strikes me you treated that young man shamefully this afternoon—most ungratefully—the stranger who saved our child!”

“I treated him! Well, I like that!” gasped Mr. Erlescombe, fanning himself with his handkerchief, and blinking under injustice and drowsiness. “It was yourself, my dear, pardon me, who, against my wishes—against my expressed wishes, I may say—” raising his tone.

“Pooh! Your expressed wishes!” said she.



"You came up to my room with your face—with your face—"

"How on earth could I come up without my face?"—peevishly.

"Interruptions are in such bad taste. You came up with your face as red as a turkey's, and you were quite incoherent through excitement. You used bad language, and mixed up sheriffs and men upon seats, and all the revolting things you could think of, until really I quite mistook the true facts of the case."

"I am glad you own it,"—in a side mutter. "I think you often mistake a good many cases."

"I beg your pardon!"—freezingly. "What were you observing?" he asked.

"Nothing!"—hurriedly.

"You were saying, my dear—"

"That when I calmly think the matter over, I fear that brave, kind, most gallant young man must have thought us singularly wanting in gratitude—nay, even in common civility."

Sweeping to her writing-table, she said: "I am going to make what hasty reparation I can. I shall send him a note saying how grieved I am that your excitability and want of comprehension made you treat him in such a seemingly uncivil way."

"My want of comprehension?—my want of manners? Well, upon my life, woman!" in exasperation.

"What woman are you addressing?" demanded she, coolly. "Your life won't be worth much to declare upon, I can assure you, unless you put a check upon your excitability and temper. Every day I live in the expectation, Robert—the full expectation that you will have a fit!"

"You live remarkably comfortable upon it!" growled he.

"I am as comfortable as I can be under the circumstances with which you have surrounded me," retorted she, meaningly. "But to return to an important matter, I shall ask this young man—Mr. Douglas, I believe—charming name—to come and stay with us during the time he likes to remain in this neighborhood; to look upon our house as his home, in fact, and come to us as early as he can to-morrow morning. That is the least return we can make for his self-devotion—his self-sacrifice, I may say."

"It appears to me that you may say anything—nay, that you do say anything! Upon my soul," said the badgered man, rising and shaking himself, "I never did hear a woman talk backward and forward like you! I declare it quite bewilders me!"

"It does not take much to do that!" replied she, scornfully. "But there is one thing I wish to impress upon you. Be civil to this young man, Robert, when he comes, and

make much of him. You can leave the rest to me."

### CHAPTER III.

#### AN OFFER.

"MOTHER and I are going to the circus this afternoon," announced Winifred Erlescombe, seating herself gracefully at the luncheon-table. "But it is not my mother's desire, as you may perhaps imagine; it is mine. I saw the procession from the distance that lends enchantment, this morning, and I have fallen in love with every one of those sweet spotted, clown-driven ponies. The only question is, can we find a gentleman to escort us?"

"There is nothing I should enjoy more!" said Clyde Douglas, from one side of the table, quickly; while from the other, Mr. Hampton was heard to say, "I shall be delighted, I am sure!"

Winnie answered the last speaker first.

"Are you sure, Mr. Hampton? Because I never heard of such a thing as a broker at a circus. Are you quite prepared, now, for what it will be? There won't be any bulls or bears, or stocks or bidding, or anything that will look home-like to you, you know."

"Mr. Hampton will go to take care of me," said the lady mother, giving him an awfully sweet smile.

"Oh! shall you be home-like? At any rate, you and Mr. Hampton can sit and frown together at the clown's jokes, can't you. But Mr. Douglas will see there the exact thing he likes."

"He is sure of it, for you will be there!" said Douglas, using a tone too low for anybody but the girl herself to hear.

She heard, and colored.

Mr. Hampton frowned horribly, in anticipation, perhaps, of the clown's follies.

"If we are all going to enjoy ourselves so much, I think we had better start," said Winnie, rising. "You have all finished, I hope? Mother, would you and Mr. Hampton like ten minutes' start?"

"It might be well," said Mrs. Erlescombe. "Young feet, Mr. Hampton, can trip more lightly than our old ones, can they not?"

"It is a question I have not studied," said the man addressed morosely. "I know the capabilities of my own. They could attend Miss Winnie's with ease, but, of course, the qualifications of your feet are beyond me. They may embrace bunions."

"You are so very funny!" said the lady, who had a bunion or two secreted. "If you'll hold my parasol for me, we will start now, shall we? I am sure you'll amuse me all the way if you go on like this."

He scarcely spoke a word to her all the way.



The whole walk along the shady lanes, and across the sunny field which cut off half a mile, was one series of strategic movements between Mr. Hampton and the lady mother, she striving to let no interruption happen to the handsome couple coming behind, walking together; he determined to have some of Winifred's attention at any hazards, and beating his adversary at the field by getting ungallantly over the stile first, and hurrying the girl away with him along the path, talking to her in jerks, and cutting off her retreat.

Winnie laughed. She was in the best of spirits, and did not seem to care to whom she chattered.

At the circus, Mr. Hampton was one too many for Mrs. Erlescombe; he arranged himself between her and her daughter.

"Sitting like patience on a monument of red carpet and rickety planks," laughed Winnie, turning to him, "smiling at clowns," as four specimens came in, and began to turn somersaults and make grimaces violently, by way of creating amusement.

"I am smiling at you," said he, with a certain amount of sternness in his voice.

"Not in that tone, I trust. Mr. Hampton, if this absurdity, that weaker brains like mine and Mr. Douglas's (laughing at the young man with the full assurance of being welcomed with a warm glance and return smile), "call fun, gets too much for your temper—"

"It is not the circus that is likely to be too much for my temper, thank you."

"Oh, well, I mean if all these people bobbing through hoops and things irritate you, go out; don't wait for us. Go home and read the stock reports. Really, now, look at those ponies; are they not pretty? Mr. Hampton, I wish the fates had made you a great star at a circus!"

"Might I ask why?"—very stiffly. "I have no wish to shine in such capacity."

"Oh, because then I should have admired you! You have long thin limbs that would have been just the thing to caper in the air with; and you have a stiff stateliness of your own that would have been majestic upon seven ponies or three nice old steeds. Look at that man, the groom or something, who just brought in those delicious cream ponies; he has been looking at you for five minutes unwinkingly. I know his sentiments agree with mine, and he is wondering what bribe he could offer you to change your vocation, even at this late time in your life."

"He is looking at you, pardon me," was the grim reply. "He is thinking, perhaps, that you would look much prettier than that young lady now making an idiot of herself upon a piece of rope."

"He is looking at Mr. Douglas," decided Miss

Erlescombe. "He is thinking what a striking clown he would make with a red-painted nose and a rose-colored dress. He is looking at all three of us. Certainly he keeps his eyes fixed admiringly upon our party—evidently it is the most distinguished-looking present."

"He is a striking-looking man himself," remarked Douglas; "of foreign extraction, I should say, and with that air about him of having seen better days. Don't you think so?"

"I don't quite know what that air is," returned Miss Erlescombe. "I hope he is not a detective in disguise, and going to take either of you gentlemen up. Really those folded arms and that fixed stare are becoming almost too much for me. Won't somebody make him move on? He is like Napoleon at Elba, meditating his escape—from six ponies galloping round him, and three men tying themselves in knots above him. Oh, hurrah, they are all going out."

But the man came in again with the next relay of horses, and again his dark, curious eyes sought that one place in the circle of seats.

"He is looking at you," whispered Douglas to Winifred, "and I don't wonder at it."

"He is looking at you, and I do wonder at it," retorted the young lady, smiling; "because—well, of course one has to glance at you sometimes; but it is a task I should always feel inclined to hurry over."

"It is a thing you certainly always do hurry over," said he, resentfully.

"Would you like my eyes fixed upon you like that strange being's? Why, I think you would be mesmerized! What would you do if you were mesmerized, Mr. Douglas? Something extraordinary, I suppose?"

"Follow you."

"Then I won't mesmerize you; you would be such a nuisance! Oh! the eyes are moving on now, as far as to Mr. Hampton. Now, Mr. Douglas, I fear you are not attending properly to this entertainment. You did not see how that man got himself balanced upon that pole up there."

"I see him, and I see how he can very easily become unbalanced."

At that moment, Mrs. Erlescombe, who had been taking a surreptitious siesta, leaned across and addressed Winnie:

"This is a low affair, and I don't mean to stop another moment. I just found one of the common men's eyes fixed upon me down there; and sitting in the same row with myself, absolutely upon the same plank, I see my dress-maker! I desire you to get down and go out at once, Winifred, without an instant's delay."

"Oh, mother, it is not half over, and Mr. Douglas and Mr. Hampton are enjoying them-



selves so much! Why should not your dressmaker sit upon the same plank as you?"

"You my child, and ask that question! A dressmaker and I sitting upon the same plank!"—rising and rustling tremendously. "Assist me to descend, Mr. Hampton, if you please. Mr. Douglas, accept my apologies for bringing you to such a mixed affair. It was this willful puss's doing!"

Something seemed to have happened to Mr. Douglas. His brow had darkened, his lips had contracted, his eyes grown stern. Like a man lost in unpleasant thought, he allowed Winnie to step down by herself (she could do it gracefully enough, but she frowned at his inattention), and followed her out of the tent. Outside they encountered the tall, foreign-looking groom bringing in newly-caparisoned steeds.

"Excuse me, ladies and gentlemen," he said, touching his cap, "but it is a pity to leave just now. The best of our entertainment is just about to commence."

As he spoke, his keen eyes flashed upon each one of the party, and a thin kind of suppressed smile curved his lips. Haughtily deigning no answer, Mr. Hampton and Mrs. Erlescombe swept by the man. Douglas turned, with his natural courtesy and charming smile, and said: "Thanks. We think we have seen enough for our money, and these ladies are tired."

They walked on, and steadily, as one who intended it, and did what he intended, Clyde Douglas attached himself to the lady-mother for the walk home, and led her on so rapidly that she had not time to cast one backward glance to see what Mr. Hampton and Winnie were doing.

"Has not the circus been just what you expected, Miss Erlescombe?" asked Hampton, looking down at the girl with a sneering kind of triumph.

"I never expected anything about it; what do you mean?" answered she, coldly.

"There is a disappointed expression upon your charming face," chuckled he.

"You must be seeing a reflection of your own," retorted she. "It is horribly hot, I know that, and so dusty."

"Let me hold your sunshade over you,"—trying to take it.

"What good will that be in keeping off the dust? It is a horrid walk, this. I am sure I wish I had not come."

"Shall I call Mr. Douglas back? I am sure he will walk with you, if you ask him."

"I wish you would go on and walk with him and mother; that would be more to the purpose. I could then enjoy myself alone."

"Better than with Douglas?"

"I should very decidedly think so!" said she, emphatically; whereupon his face brightened.

"How long is that young man going to stay here! He has been here six days already, and has been using this house as if it were his own."

"Has he really?" asked she, dreamily. "Six days! Is it so long as that?"

"Will you come on the water with me for an hour or so when we get home, Miss Erlescombe, please?"

"The moment I get home I am going to drink six cups of tea, Mr. Hampton."

"But afterward?—you have not been in a boat with me for so long."

"I can't say what I can do until I have had that tea; after it, perhaps, if I feel refreshed."

"Six cups of tea ought to prove refreshing."

"They ought. Well, perhaps, if I do feel very much refreshed, and nothing more attractive turns up, I may step into a boat with you, Mr. Hampton."

"Thanks!" he said, effusively.

But after the tea had been partaken of, and Mr. Hampton was studying the newspaper, Winifred saw Clyde Douglas standing by the river, looking so handsome, so manly, so *debonair*, in his cool flannel suit, with his cigar in his mouth, that she went across to join him.

"Mr Douglas, you left something behind you in the circus."

"What did I leave?" asked he, surprisedly, turning to her and throwing away his cigar.

"You left me!" she said, smiling, as she clasped her hands demurely before him. "Am not I something?"

He looked at her, as the sun gilded the hair beneath her hat, and lighted up her azure liquid eyes, and fell searchingly upon the pure tinted face that bore its light so well, and a sudden rush of dark coloring rose into his own face.

"Come on the water," he pleaded, stooping to undo the fastening of the boat that was moored against the bank. "Just for an hour or two."

"I don't think my mother would like me to take excursions of an hour or two with young single gentlemen unchaperoned," said she, prudishly. "Besides, unfortunately, I have half-promised to go out in this very boat for half an hour with Mr. Hampton."

"With Hampton! Unchaperoned, of course, with Hampton?"

"Ah, yes. You see he is elderly, and—"

"Preferable, of course, to me. Don't stop what you were going to say."

"I was not going to say that; I only thought it,"—mischievously. "What I was going to say was that he is elderly and safe."

"And I am unsafe?" asked he, eagerly, bending down with his dangerous handsome glance.

"Have you any reason to think you are?"



returned she, moving from him as she laughed and colored. "But don't come so near, please."

"I must come near enough to see you. You forget I am a little short sighted. I lost my eye-glass, too, the first day I met you and I never have been really able to see you as you are, I believe"—calmly regarding her.

"You have sustained a very serious loss! How do I look when seen as I am now?" laughed she. "Do you mind telling me?"

"You look the most beautiful woman, save one, that I ever beheld!"

"I see something about you that I have never observed before!" said she, talking quickly, in confusion. "That little gold locket hanging just above your watch-chain! What is in it?" picking it up and opening it before he could check her.

A lovely woman's face was inside—a girl's face, smiling and bright, with golden hair and soft blue eyes, and features sweet and winsome.

"Who is it?" Winnie asked, hastily, looking up with a pang she could not account for, and that suddenly turned her face pale.

"The most beautiful woman I have ever beheld! The only woman I ever loved!" he said, gently taking the locket, and closing it ere he put it out of sight.

There was silence for a moment. Douglas was looking at his companion, but her eyes were fixed on the hurrying, rippling stream. The whole scene—the water and the lawn, the flowers and the sunlight—seemed to have changed in one brief instant. The beauty of the day seemed to have gone. The air felt chilly. The girl gave a little shiver as she turned and took a step toward the house.

In that moment, however, Mr. and Mrs. Erlescombe appeared; she smiling, as she always smiled upon Mr. Douglas; he looking worried and anxious.

"Mrs. Erlescombe, I appeal to you," said Douglas, meeting the lady; "I am entreating Miss Erlescombe to come on the river for an hour, but she says you would not like it."

"Dear, dutiful child," said the gushing mother, putting her hand on the girl's sleeve; "she is always thinking of what her parents would like or dislike. When you choose a wife, dear Mr. Douglas, take an old woman's advice, and choose a girl who pays her parents the same deference and idolatry she will be obliged to yield to her husband!"

"Mother, what a stupid remark!" cried the dutiful daughter.

"Mr. Douglas knows otherwise," said the lady, with smiles and meaning looks toward her guest. "Take Winnie on the water for an hour? Yes, surely I can trust her to you. Go, dearest, and enjoy yourself with our

guest!"—stroking the lace on Winnie's pink dress.

"Thanks, mother; I don't want to! I've half promised to go out with Mr. Hampton!"

"Mr. Hampton is not of the slightest consequence!" said Mrs. Erlescombe, decidedly.

"Oh! is he not?" muttered her lord and master. "He will let you know whether he is not, sooner or later!"

"To show you of how little consequence I consider an engagement with poor old Mr. Hampton (no doubt a well-meaning, useful person, Mr. Douglas, but not in our set, of course—my husband has him here only just on business), I desire my daughter to accept your most delightful offer of rowing her for a short time on this river."

She spoke to the guest, and her face was wreathed with the most delightful of smiles. Winnie understood the tone used, and stepped into the boat without saying another word.

They pulled from shore in silence. When they had got out some distance, Mr. Douglas said, with a smile on his lips, as he leaned across to his companion, "A penny for your thoughts, Miss Erlescombe."

"I don't feel inclined to sell them. Take care of your right oar, Mr. Douglas"—shortly. "We are going through the bridge."

"Shall we go through the bridge or turn now? Up or down the stream would you prefer?"

"I have no preference. But perhaps we had better turn and go down; it will take shorter time."

"I am sorry you should come out with me to be bored, Miss Erlescombe," observed he, stiffly.

"Oh, never mind; it won't last long, and we all have disagreeable things to do at times," answered she, pleasantly.

"What did you think of that portrait inside my locket?" he inquired, resting upon his oars as he fixed his eyes upon her, and the boat floated slowly down the stream.

"You eulogized it so highly yourself, I scarcely like to give an opinion," replied she, turning aside and dabbling one pretty white hand in the water.

"I said what I thought—that I never saw a face to equal that in sweetness and beauty, but then I am not an unprejudiced judge. You cannot fail to see beauty in a person you have loved for a lifetime with all the depths of devotion your nature is capable of. Can you?"

"I dare say not; I know nothing about that,"—coldly.

"Shall you never know it?" he asked, leaning forward, until his hand touched hers, and his glance thrilled her through and through.

"I wish you would not try to upset the boat," said she, leaning back. "Little as you



may believe it, Mr. Douglas, I have no fancy for a ducking this chilly evening."

"If I upset you, I will bring you out," he assured her.

"Thanks; you are very kind, but you could not get me out before all the starch had been taken from my dress, I feel sure."

"Did it strike you that this portrait in my locket was anything like yourself?" he asked, insinuatingly.

"That portrait did not strike me at all. I am very sorry; but it is my nature to speak the truth, Mr. Douglas"—with a little unnatural laugh.

"You remind me so much of her"—musingly. "Every time I look at you I think of her, and that is partly why. Miss Erlescombe, may I confide in you?"—he changed his sentence.

"Oh, do! Nothing makes me laugh like a love-story—nothing amuses me so much!"

"Do you never speak seriously?" he asked, in disappointed accents.

"Usually. I am quite serious now when I say I wish you would row me in to the bank and let me land. I should much prefer to walk home, I am so cold."

"Is that your only reason for leaving me?" asked he, making no attempt to fulfill her request.

"Well, to be candid with you, I just caught a glimpse of Mr. Hampton's long coat waving amid the trees, and I should like to walk home with it."

When she said that, he turned without another word, but with an entire change of countenance, and rowing in to the bank, assisted her to land, with a grave severity of manner that might have amused a looker-on.

"Mr. Hampton, what are you doing?" Winnie cried, tripping after the stiff, thin figure and the professional coat. "What are you doing, Mr. Hampton, I say?"

"I am walking," said he, turning freezingly.

"I see that; but you are doing something else, too, or you would not be too engrossed to notice me. I saw the breeze agitating your coat-tails a moment through the trees, and I insisted upon Mr. Douglas landing me, that I might come and join you. Now, aren't you very pleased to see me?"

She had not calculated upon the effect of that coquettish speech, that upward, mirthful glance, that touch of her hand upon his arm. It sounds incredible, but she did not know how bewitching she was looking that afternoon. She was not quite aware of how well pink satine and a shepherdess but, all covered with white lace, became her, and she had no idea that this man really cared for her.

She turned, trembling and white, and hot and cold, as her two hands were gathered

in his sinewy, close grasp, and his countenance, white, and earnest, and strained, told her the truth in an instant's flash before his hoarse voice spoke.

"Miss Erlescombe—Winnie, I am nearly crazy!"

"Oh, Mr. Hampton, don't you think you are mistaken?"

"I am mad with suspense, and anxiety, and anger! I am being most abominably treated! I was invited down here for the express purpose of marrying you!"

"Marrying me? You? Why, really you must be mad!"

"Is it the thought of a madman? Child, does it so appear to you? Is it too incredible, too revolting an idea for you to grasp?"

"It really is. I don't know anything about revolting; but incredible it really is. Why, you are as old as—I mean, there is nothing in you that I should ever be able to fall in love with! I mean, you are just the kind of man I never should dream of marrying—I never could marry, I mean," stammered the girl, getting more hopelessly entangled at each sentence in her wild confusion and dismay. "I think you are entirely mistaken, Mr. Hampton. The idea of your marrying me never could have entered anybody's head. You can't mean it yourself, really,"—in pathetic, tearful, agonized pleading. "I hope you don't mind my saying all this? I don't know how to express myself."

"You know how to cut deep enough to cure," he said, in a curious voice. "Do you mean to tell me that you were not in your mother's plot, then, Miss Erlescombe? Now, be truthful!"

"I always am truthful,"—indignantly. "I don't know what you mean by my mother's plot."

"A plan, if you like the term better, to save herself and husband from ruin by your attractions. I see into it easily enough. I came down here, was cajoled by her, flattered by the old man, bewitched by you. But I am a dangerous edged tool to play with. If the kind of thing that has been going on—since this new quarry, this younger rival has appeared on the scene—is carried on much further, I may prove unpleasant. I cannot fathom your mother's design, or rather the sudden turn it has taken. Are you in it now, I want to know?"

He had been holding her hands the whole time he spoke, and she tried in vain to free herself.

"I don't understand you," she faltered, the thought of madness filling her with terror. "Mr. Hampton, let us walk quietly on, and talk of birds—bees—butterflies, etc.!"—in wild persuasiveness.

"I shall talk on this subject until I have ex-



hausted it," he replied, shortly,—“until, at any rate, my mind is clear upon one point. Winifred, will you marry me?”

“No!” she said, in low, decisive tones.

And her eyes met his gaze as she spoke.

“Why not? State your reasons, if you have any.”

“I could never marry a man unless I gave my whole heart with my hand,” she said, coloring deeply. “To do otherwise would be to injure him as much as myself, Mr. Hampton; and I would sooner—”

Then some expression in his face struck her, and instantly her own softened, and her sweet eyes filled with tears.

“You are fond of me, I believe,” she said, with a sob. “Oh, how wicked I have been never to guess this before! Oh, what can I do to make amends?”

“Marry me!” he said, speaking thickly and low.

But she turned aside, and shook her head.

“You don’t believe in my love,” he continued, his tones growing more impassioned with each word. “You think because I am old and ugly, because the fire of youth and its attractions are not mine, that the power to love and cherish, the capacity for devotion and worship are gone too. Child, I can love you better than a younger man. The fickleness of youth, the petty exactions, the tyranny of a young man’s affection are not to be expected from me. Winifred, won’t you be mine?”

She felt that she would sooner die; but she did not express herself carelessly again. The unmistakable suffering in the haggard, gaunt face touched her strangely. She went up to him, and put her soft little hand on his arm.

“Oh, Mr. Hampton!” she whispered—and when he met her tearful gaze he knew that it was no put on sentimentality,—“I am so sorry for the suffering I have unwittingly caused you. Believe me, I never dreamed, I never guessed this or anything like it, whatever my mother’s thoughts may have been. I never presumed to fancy that a man like you would think of a girl like me. ‘Tis the first offer I have ever had,” she declared, piteously; “and if it is to cause pain like this, I hope I may never have another, that is all!”

“Vain hope,” he said, slowly, “unless you marry before another man has time to see you. Winifred, marry me, and be safe and at rest from the dangers and misery your beauty will surely bring upon you. For your own sake more than for mine I ask this.”

“His brain must surely be a little touched,” thought the girl, pitifully, “if he thinks that to save me from misery my best plan is to marry a man I don’t at all like!”

Then aloud, “Go home, Mr. Hampton, and forget about me. I am not worth being in

your thoughts. I am giddy, weak, stupid, young. I should be no companion for a life like yours. You would regret in one week the foolish step you had taken. I am bad-tempered, frivolous, vain—oh, I assure you, not half as nice as I seem! I have faults by the dozen—quite bad faults!”

“Perhaps; but I love you!” he said, with head turned away, his hands fast clasped on his silk umbrella.

“And I am very, very grateful for your love!” she whispered gently, the tears rising in her eyes again, as a wild memory and a comparison between the figure before her and another one made her heart beat fast, and a realization of the pain she had caused filled her mind with repentance. “I shall never forget the honor you have done me by—by thinking of me thus, and I hope you will still let me be your friend, Mr. Hampton. Dear Mr. Hampton, I would cut off my hand to save you this trouble! Oh, dear, I wish you had never come down here!”

She was too absorbed to hear an approaching footstep. Her eyes were too blinded with tears to see a man who passed them just at that moment, and struck by something in their attitude or demeanor, paused to give a good long stare at either as he passed.

He was a tall, remarkable-looking individual—a kind of mixture between a workingman and a jockey in dress—foreign-looking, and ill-to-do, apparently.

Mr. Hampton was staring hard at the ground with a fixed, stony gaze, when suddenly, without a word, he turned, and swiftly strode away from Winnie, taking his way, apparently without design, amid the little paths through the trees.

Winnie hesitated a moment as to whether she should follow him, then saying to herself, “I can do no good: I can say nothing more than I have said. He does seem a little odd in his mind just now. Perhaps quiet is the best thing for him.” And she turned toward home; but as she passed the tree where the stranger man was standing, he came out, and raising his hat, confronted her.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### THE BEGINNING OF THE STORM.

“I DECLARE I am in a state of bewilderment!” said Mr. Erlescombe to his wife, as she sat on the lawn about half an hour after Winnie had been sent off on the river with Clyde Douglas. “I have not a single clear idea in my head!”

“Do you usually have?” inquired his better-half, placidly doubtful.

“If I don’t, it is your fault. You pretend to manage my affairs, and you are bringing us all to rack and ruin as quickly as you can do



it! Upon my word, I sometimes think you have taken leave of your senses!"

"You do not think I have passed them on to you, I hope?" replied she, contemptuously.

"I insist upon knowing what you are about! We invited Hampton down here for the express purpose of getting him to fall in love with Winnie—"

"Which he has done," interrupted the lady, coolly.

"And now he has done it, you play fast and loose with him—or, rather, only loose! You insult him, treat him with contempt, bring before him this young Douglas, a nice young fellow enough, but, bless my soul—"

"You need not trouble about that. Your blessings won't do it much good!" calmly picking up her stitches.

"Bless my soul, woman, you must have been sent in the world to aggravate men! You send Winnie about with Douglas on purpose to vex Hampton, and there stands Hampton, with my life in his hands, as it were."

"If it were only that—" she began, scornfully.

But he interrupted, working himself up into a passion.

"It is something more—at least, something that touches you, madam, more! He has in his hands the power to make us all beggars to-morrow—to turn us out of house and home at any moment. Every inch of land I possess is mortgaged beyond its value, and Hampton is the mortgagee. Every stick and stone I possess is his when he likes to claim it! He has a bill of sale on our very furniture. Here I stand—"

"I wish you would sit down—standing, brandishing your stick within an inch of my head, and shouting at the top of your voice. I suppose you want the gardener to know that every inch of land you have is mortgaged."

"He and every one else will know it soon enough if you go on as you propose, madam! Here I stand, in the eyes of the world Robert Erlescombe, well-to-do, and influential. In reality, I am Hampton's slave, and he knows it!"

"More shame for you to have acted so, and ruined your wife and sweet, innocent child."

"I ruined you! Your extravagance, woman, has done more than half of it! I told you soon after we were married that if you would not retrench—"

"I did not marry you to retrench. Now, Robert, keep quiet, and I will tell you that I have a plan to lift us out of all your difficulties. You shall be well-to-do and safe yet, if only you won't interfere."

"I must interfere. You said Winnie should marry Hampton."

"My daughter marry that piece of parchment—that bad, inferiorly-bred money

broker!"—the speaker rose with majesty, and swept about on the lawn—"never, Robert. I have not sunk low enough for that! Sacrifice our sweet child's happiness—the life-happiness of our only child—to a man whom she could never love—to a man whom really I don't consider a gentleman? Once, and for all, it shall not be! Beauty and parchment shall not be allied; youth and vicious age shall not be united with my consent. Pahl the very idea of that shriveled, ugly stick for a son-in-law makes me sick!"

"He will be a downright ugly stick to turn against you," said the husband, fearfully. "And he will turn sharp enough if he thinks all is not going to be as he has been reckoning upon. It is all very well to consider your prejudices and Winnie's feelings, but, my love, be cautious. Hampton—"

"Leave him to me. I happen to have discovered a little something about Mr. Hampton just lately," said the lady, triumphantly—"a something which makes me abhor the very idea of his claiming my daughter—a something he little suspects any creature knows but himself. Ha, ha! Mr. Hampton, appearances are very smooth indeed, but I know a something!"

"A something against him?" asked Earlescombe, eagerly. "My dear love, if you know anything against the man in any shape or way, tell it to me, and I will make use of it. Now, confide in me!" persuasively. "It requires a man's brain to manage these matters. You have found out something disparaging to Hampton?"—coming gleefully close.

"Yes; which I am going to keep to myself, too, until the proper time comes for making use of it,"—coldly moving away.

"Was there ever a being so aggravating as a woman?" striking his stick into the ground. "You have got a decent card in your hand, you say, and you'll play it so badly, all for want of a little decent advice, that we shall lose the game."

"We shall not lose the game if I don't allow you to meddle with it," said she, tranquilly counting the stitches of her pattern. "I have got a handful of good cards, and I shall play them as I think best. I really consider, Robert, when I think it over, that we have lowered ourselves by touching the money of a man like Hampton. He must be paid off, that is what must be done to him—paid off, and forbidden to set foot in this house again!"

"I should like to do the latter thing," muttered Erlescombe. "But how will you arrange the former, my dear?"

Mrs. Erlescombe rose, grasped her fancy work, looked all around in an impressive way, put her finger to her lips, and then putting them close to her husband's ear, announced: "That is a millionaire after Winnie."



"Hampton is a millionaire?"

"Hampton is a dunce. That Mr. Douglas is a millionaire in disguise, Robert, dear. Oh, you need not stare in that foolish way! I am never mistaken, nor deceived. He is as rich as Croesus, and he is falling madly in love with the child. Of course when he marries it will be a pleasure to him to pay off his father-in-law's debts; a trifle to him, too, if his wealth is half what I have reason to believe. It will soon be arranged when the rival is taken out of the road, and that horrid snail, Hampton, shall have every cent of his money, never fear!"—waving her needle contemptuously.

"The horrid snail is very relieved to hear it!" said Mr. Hampton, stepping out from the shrubbery behind them, with a dangerous expression upon his countenance. "He had begun to fear that, do the best he could for himself, he would be obliged to lose something by the rascally way he has been duped and taken in here. You will perhaps prove your kindly assertion at your earliest convenience, madam. I am disinclined to wait longer for a single cent of what your husband owes me. It shall be paid!"

"You have been listening?" cried the lady, rising with a kind of a shriek, and brandishing her work in her husband's face. "Robert, you idiot! you always do talk so disgustingly loud!"

"Whether I have been listening or not is immaterial. I have heard every word of your opinions respecting me, madam, and I have formed my own resolutions accordingly. One question, though, I will trouble you to answer me; and that is, what is the something you have lately discovered against my character which renders me, in your eyes, an unfit person to claim the daughter you were only too anxious I should woo and win a week ago."

"In your room there stands a little brass box," said Mrs. Erlescombe, significantly, too infuriated to weigh her words or their consequence, "and in that box a packet of letters lie!"

But she trembled as she saw the change that passed over his face. It went from white to a kind of ashen green, and for a moment his passion was too great to allow him to speak.

"Letters which you have read, madam!" he hissed, at length. "I thank you for informing me of the way you understand the duties of a hostess—the mean, dishonorable, criminal opening of private boxes and peering into private matters that you indulge in at your guest's expense! I shall know how to treat you now. But for this little matter I might, by some foolish pity or leniency of thought toward you as a woman, have mitigated some of the punishment you deserve. You have done away with that risk."

"I have found out how you treat a woman! I happily found out in time to save my own innocent, trustful child from the fate the writer of those letters underwent at your barbarous hands! I don't care a scrap for you, Mr. Hampton, grand as you think yourself, and in a rage as I know you are! I don't care a pin for you! Bring me into court if you like, and let the whole thing be heard, and those letters read, and hear whether the court will side with me or you! Ha, ha!"

"I knew that Earlescombe, here, married considerably beneath himself when he married you!" retorted the broker, with a little sarcasm.

"I never mistook you for a lady, and had reason to believe you were about as low by birth as his friends accused you of being; but I never sympathized with his friends in their righteous vexation at his *mesalliance*, or pitied him for his own folly, until now."

"Leave my presence!" shrieked the lady. "Go out of my house and grounds, Hampton, and take your money with you if you like! I would rather be sold out than subjected to this from a snail like you; and there you stand, coward!" (firing upon her husband), "with no word to say for your legal wife—no stone to hurl at the man who dares to insult her before your eyes!"

"He will have enough to say presently upon another subject," observed Hampton, quietly. "You shall have official notice, Erlescombe, of the course I mean to pursue, without any painful delay, I assure you."

"Don't take any notice of her!" Mr. Erlescombe came round to the infuriated man and put a shaking hand on his arm. "Don't ruin me, there's a good fellow, just because she is out of her senses! Upon my word, I am afraid of her often; I think she has a little lunacy about her. I rue the day I married her, I can tell you!" in a piteous whisper. "Don't ruin me and Winnie because she is a chattering vixen. We have nothing to do with her plans, I swear. We want you to marry Winnie."

"In proof of which assertion, your daughter has just unqualifiedly refused me!" said Hampton, distinctly.

"My daughter refuses a low, vicious money broker. Of course, my daughter knows what is just to her parents and her bringing up," observed Mrs. Erlescombe, tranquilly. "Ah, yes! I can trust my daughter in any strait!"

"You shall be in a strait presently that shall try your bringing up to the utmost, I can promise you!" uttered Hampton, trembling with rage.

"Take me to the house, Robert," said the foolish woman, turning to her husband, affectedly. "This vulgarity makes me feel faint, take me to my smelling-bottle."

"I would advise you to make the most of your house and your smelling-bottle while you



have it!" sneered the other. "You won't have anything to call your own much longer, you may rely upon that."

Just at that moment Winnie came tripping toward them. Her hat was swinging in her hand, her brown hair ruffled by the breeze; her eyes sparkling, her cheeks glowing; her whole air and bearing too full of some secret happiness to allow her to notice anything peculiar in the countenances of the group she interrupted.

Catching Mr. Hampton by the arm, she drew him just a few paces aside, and said, eagerly, "Mr. Hampton, I have a message for you from an acquaintance of yours, who asked me to give it to you without a moment's delay. He said it was of immediate importance, and I was to give it you in just these words:—'Your dear old friend, Mrs. Barnes, has come back from England, and would be very glad to see you if you would call upon her as early as possible at 62 Eightieth street, Harlem.' I took particular note of the address. The man said she did not know yours, or she would have written to you, or called on you herself; but she would be unfeignedly glad to see you for the sake of *auld lang syne*. Oh! and he said that in case you might have forgotten the old lady's identity, it would bring her to your recollection to remind you that she had a niece called Rhoda. She is so anxious to see you now she has come back from England that she has employed this man to look for you. By mere chance he saw you in the circus, and half-recognized you there. Then he saw you to-day, but you went off so suddenly that he could not overtake you, so was obliged to ask me to take the message for him. Now, was there ever a long message remembered so exactly, and delivered so correctly?"

Was there ever a message received so strangely? Mr. Hampton's features went back to the ashen green they had taken when speaking to his hostess a little time ago; his eyes glared at Winnie, and he threw her from him ere the last words had left her lips.

"You did well to call yourself weak and stupid!" he muttered. "To aid and abet your mother, to provoke a lion already roused; to put the last straw on a man whose temper has broken, is weak and stupid indeed! So you are in it, too! Well, then, my last grain of compunction has vanished!"

With that, he turned and left the astonished girl, and went straight to consult a railway guide.

## CHAPTER V.

### THROUGH THE WOOD.

THE man came forth from behind a tree, and confronted Miss Eriescombe as Mr. Hampton left her.

"I beg your pardon, miss," he said. And Winnie gave a little start.

She was agitated and confused, pained and unhappy.

It was excessively lonely there; and the stranger's countenance, although it brought some half-memory to her mind, was not one that, seen closely, was calculated to inspire a timid mind with confidence. It was handsome, but dissipated and sinister-looking when, as now, it tried to conjure up an agreeable smile; and the eyes—dark, keen, and peculiar—although they were noting every change in Winnie's countenance, were carefully avoiding her glance.

"Do you want anything?" the girl asked, nervously.

"I am only bold enough to inquire, miss, if the gentleman who has just parted from you calls himself Douglas, by any chance?" said the man, with a respectful tone that was quite humble.

"Douglas?" repeated she, coloring, and speaking without thought. "No; that is Mr. Hampton."

"Hampton—Hampton—um! You think that is his right name, miss?"

"Why would he be likely to call himself by a wrong one?" she replied, surprisedly.

"Not at all—not at all. I only want to be quite sure that he is the Mr. Hampton I am wanting to find. I have something to communicate to his advantage, miss. Why, I have been looking for him for months."

"To his advantage! Are you one of those odd advertisements?"

"I am not an advertisement, miss. I am an honest, plain man, as you see; but"—suddenly putting on an air of confidence—"I am from one of those offices that put advertisements in the papers, sure enough, such as you allude to, miss. 'If so-and-so will communicate with so-and-so, he will hear of something to his advantage,' or, 'if H. B. will return to his disconsolate widow all will be forgiven,' and so on. You are very discerning, miss, to see a man's calling so quick. It is not often folks, ladies especially, will believe in us and trust us, so we often fail by those means to do the good we might wish to do," meekly.

"You look so odd," said Winnie, very pleased with her credit for discernment. "I thought you must belong to something queer like that. By-the-by, though," becoming suddenly suspicious, "I have seen you before. Now I recollect, were you not at the circus the other day, doing something with the horses?" she questioned, sternly.

"I was, miss," he said, apologetically. "It was a demeaning and a lowering thing to do, but in our profession we often have to descend to those subterfuges in the way of business. I



never stick at anything in the pursuit of business, miss. So that was Mr. Hampton sitting beside you in the reserved seats that day. Oh, dear, if I had only guessed it, what time it might have saved me, and what pleasure given him! I never dreamed of his being in this neighborhood, and that is the truth. Now, it is very unfortunate, here am I telegraphed for up by our chief office—on my way to the station now, miss—can't spare a moment, and there is Mr. Hampton gone away through the wood, we don't know where, and here am I holding a message for him that it will just take a load from his heart to hear, the message of all others that will brighten his spirits (he looked dull, I noticed. Ah! we judge expressions rapidly—obliged to, miss); quite a simple-ordinary message, too, such as you or any friend could deliver."

"Why did you ask me first if his name was Douglas?" interrupted Winnie, curiously.

"Why, miss? Ah! I could not tell why I do a great many things. In our profession we can't just speak as we would like. There is a Mr. Douglas staying at your house, miss, I've been told, but you, of course, don't know much about his business."

He spoke in a manner which a more experienced person than Winnie might have thought too careless.

Miss Erlescombe made a haughty movement of her dainty little head.

"I am not Mr. Douglas's business agent," said she.

"Pardon," said the man; then drawing out his watch, "I must be going; I shall have a run for this train." Then turning as by a striking thought, "You could not, miss, I suppose (I am ashamed to trouble you like this), tell me of a trustworthy messenger I could give my message to take now to Mr. Hampton. When we are pressed for time, we often have to employ outside hands like that."

Take a load from his mind!—brighten him up wonderfully!

Impulsive Winifred turned with only that thought in her mind. Her heart ached for Mr. Hampton, and she wished that *her* hands could carry him a little meed of consolation.

"If you are sure it is a message that will please him, I will deliver it to Mr. Hampton with the greatest willingness myself," said she. "I shall see him probably again in less than half an hour."

Inexperienced, trusting, nineteen-year-old Winnie! she never noticed, as the man overwhelmed her with thanks and then slowly and emphatically retailed the lengthy message to her, his evil smile, his tone of self-congratulation, his manner as though he had just gained the very thing he wanted. It sounded a pleasant enough message, and not until she had

repeated it to Mr. Hampton and the storm it raised had overwhelmed her, did she doubt one word of the stranger's plausible tale.

Inexperienced Winnie, indeed! She walked slowly toward home after she had parted from the man, but ere she entered her own grounds a voice arrested her, a voice whose deep, pleasant melody thrilled her every pulse.

"So you are not traveling home with Hampton's coat after all, Miss Erlescombe," said Clyde Douglas.

"I walked a little way with it," said she. "You see it got on ahead, and I am following it."

"You left me under false pretenses, I consider."

"Oh, no! I thought you quite understood that I really left you because I was tired of your society, Mr. Douglas."

"Of course it is an easy thing to understand that," he muttered. "Miss Erlescombe, do you express yourself with this lovely candor to all your friends? You must have a great crowd of them, I should say."

"I don't want a great crowd of false friends and flatterers," said she, bitterly, her head turned away so that he could not see her expression. "I never pretend myself to like anybody I don't really care for, and I wish people that don't care for me would be honest enough to say so at once, and not consider that politeness demands from them a whole heap of meaningless attentions, just because they are staying in the same house!" vehemently.

"Are there people who, after once knowing you, can manage to care not a particle for you?" he asked, quietly; and though she would not meet it, she felt his dark thrilling gaze through her every nerve.

"There are certainly people who pay a lot of meaningless attentions just because—oh, well, I suppose it is because they are staying in the same house with one; I can't see any other reason for it."

"You allude to Mr. Hampton, perhaps?"

"No, I most certainly do not allude to Mr. Hampton. I think he means what he says, at any rate. I like Mr. Hampton."

"That is quite an unnecessary assertion. That is one of the things that goes without saying," returned he, stiffly.

"I mean I like him a great deal better than I do you."

His face changed a little; but he answered, sarcastically:

"Anybody who runs may read that, Miss Erlescombe. Don't trouble to make conversation for me in this way, thanks."

"He is always gentlemanly and considerate, and never thinks of teasing me with sarcasm!" said she, her voice trembling.

"Suppose we agree that he is perfection,



won't that simplify things?" suggested he, with a careless laugh.

"He might easily be perfection in comparison with you; for I do think, Mr. Douglas,"—turning upon him with flaming cheeks and flashing eyes—"you are the most aggravating, horrid man I ever did come across!"

"Thanks, awfully. It is so nice to reflect that just now you assured me that you never said a thing you did not mean."

"I don't care. You are the most irritating, disagreeable person I was ever obliged to walk with. I declare you are!"

"You are not obliged to walk with me," retorted he. "I left the boat up there because I was tired of pulling it about alone, and I thought a solitary walk might change the current of my thoughts; but I am sure I have no wish to intrude. I will wait here until you get ten minutes' or so start, then I will follow without intruding upon your lonely ramble."

"Don't be absurd!"

"I am hardly in good enough spirits to be absurd, I fancy,"—shortly.

"Are you not in good spirits? I am sure you seem frightfully gay and loquacious."

"Loquacious one may be, and outwardly gay; but"—speaking slowly, and with a tone in his voice that she had never heard before—"when the person a man likes best in the world, the only person in whose good opinion he cares about standing, has, with a great deal of unnecessary candor and pains, taken the trouble to make him understand how thoroughly she dislikes him, he can scarcely just then be expected to be in very good spirits."

She met his quiet, earnest glance just for a moment; then, turning away, colored wildly, and plucked at the foliage as she passed it.

"I can't understand about all these people you like best in the world, and consider loveliest, and have loved with depths of devotion for years. They get mixed up in my mind, and puzzle me. Oh, dear! I wish men could be understood!"

"I should like to understand one woman," he said, gently—"only one!"

"The lady in the locket, I suppose! Can't you fathom her? That is hard, really, after depths of devotion for years!"—with a little miserable laugh.

"She never puzzled me," he answered, gravely. "She never scorned my devotion, nor hurt my feelings, nor willfully misunderstood what I felt and meant. She was never sweet and kind one moment, and cold as ice and snubbing the next. She never tortured for the sake of giving pain, and laughed at suffering that she could not understand; and she would have sympathized and pitied, even if she could not have relieved, pain that she herself had caused!"

"Would she, indeed? I expect she must be perfect."

"I think she was perfect."

"Then I can't think why in the world you don't stay with her!" cried the girl, pricked on by the stabs of a jealousy too great to bear. "I am sure perfect people are not so common that you can afford to treat one lightly when you have been lucky enough to find her. To leave a perfect person for a few days' fishing seems to me too ungrateful; and I am sure, if I were the perfect person, I should expect to be treated with a little more consideration."

"I have not left her—she left me," he cried, in low, grave accents. "She is dead, Miss Erlescombe!"

"Dead! Oh, Mr. Douglas, I never thought!"—turning swift repentant eyes from him.

He bent his head, and his glance met hers as he added, "She is dead, and she was my mother, Miss Erlescombe!"

They were just passing through the shrubbery that adjoined the lawn at Elm Grove, and the long shadows were really enveloping the short green grass; but it seemed to Winnie suddenly as if a storm had swept in the blackest darkness from the sky, and the sun in its fullest might had shone forth after a year's eclipse.

Mr. and Mrs. Erlescombe and Mr. Hampton were standing on the lawn with ex-pressions which Douglas saw instantly were significant of anything but what was pleasant. Winnie ran from her companion, who would have avoided the lawn, and seizing Mr. Hampton's arm, drew him aside, as has been already said, to tell her innocent message. But she was too engrossed by her own gleam of bliss to comprehend what had happened.

"We are ruined!" said Mr. Erlescombe, sitting down and turning pale and heated. "Trust a woman to clinch matters! You have done it now, my love. We are ruined, ruined, ruined!"

"Done what?—what does he mean?" asked the girl, wondering.

"Does he ever know what he means?" said the wife, who understood him.

"Winnie, love, pardon my asking a home-question," drawing the girl aside; "but your dear father is a little excited about your settlement in life. He wanted you to marry Mr. Hampton; but I—ah! dear me. I was a maiden once, and understand those blushes. There is a some one nearer and dearer, is there not, sweet love?"

"Oh, mother," said the girl, hiding her face on her mother's shoulder, "I don't know. I—I—"

"We know nothing about him," soliloquized the mother, softly; "but there is nobility stamped on that countenance. Poor he may



be, and probably is; but there is wealth of mind, my child, that I can appreciate. Your poor father, he is sordid and weak, but I urge you to let this young man speak out his heart, and I shall not say him nay; neither will you, pussy, eh?"

"Oh, mother, I don't know that he wants any nay or anything else said to him. I don't know that he cares one atom for me! I mean he has never said—I mean—"

"You mean that he does not intend to ask you to marry him?" hissed the lady, anxiously. "My dear, if he does not he is a rascal—a base deceiver! Winnie, I command you to encourage him in every way in your power to propose. If he does not within four days he shall be turned out of this house, and you shall never see him again! Now, mark that!"

## CHAPTER VI.

### RUIN AND DISGRACE.

THE dinner-table was covered with plate, and glass, and flowers, and costly wines and viands. A footman and a butler, in livery, waited upon the four diners.

Mrs. Erlescombe rustled in moire, and her diamonds flashed in the light. Winnie was clad simply in Indian muslin, but she wore pearls that had cost no little sum. Inside the room and outside, where, through the open window, the gardens lay in the twilight, there was every evidence of taste, and aristocracy, and wealth. Across the hall, the luxurious drawing-room was lighted by the soft, becoming illumination of countless wax candles.

It was a pleasant house for a young man like Clyde Douglas to stay in, and it was nicer now than Mr. Hampton had left it.

"I see two men coming up the drive," said Winnie, who sat opposite the window—"two such peculiar looking men, papa. What can they want at this time of day? And they are coming to the front door, too, I declare!"

Mr. Erlescombe turned a little pale and started. He had been given to doing that since Mr. Hampton had left his house suddenly. He got up now, murmuring some excuse, and went into the hall, as an altercation between the genteel footman and the visitors grew loud.

"I have come at this time of day to make it as private as I can," one gruff, strange voice was heard saying, "and we'll make it as quiet for you all as we can—if you—smart young chap you are, to be sure!"—surveying the butler—"treat us like gentlemen. But business is business. Mr. Erlescombe,"—approaching the dining-room door, and thrusting a paper into the master of the house's shaking hand,— "you understand what that means. I've come to take an inventory."

"Insolent knave, what is the meaning of

this?" cried Mrs. Erlescombe, leaving her seat, and sweeping toward the speaker. "This is some vile insult of Mr. Hampton's! Leave the house at once, or my servants shall eject you!"

"I should like to see your fine servants put a finger upon me!" sneered the man. "You need not agitate yourself like that, ma'am. I dare say you have had creditors in your house before. Anyhow, it won't be the last time, if all they say is true; so get used to it; and if you treat us politely we will do the same to you. That is honest enough, now, come!"

"It is some absurd practical joke," explained the lady, turning to Douglas. "Take these men to the kitchen,"—turning to the footman, who looked very much inclined to give notice on the spot,— "and come back and finish your dinner, Robert. You can draw a check for whatever they want after dinner, and send them away!"—grandly.

"I shall never draw another check as long as I live!" wailed the poor, weak man, too stricken down to obey his wife. "I shall die under this! I, who have lived honored and respected, and my ancestors before me, in this old home, to see every stick and stone sold from under me!—I, Robert Erlescombe, a pauper, with not even a chair to call my own! Well, well, it has come at last, and perhaps 'tis best so. One can but sink under it. We must all die some time, and I am better gone now. I shall not be missed. I have ruined my innocent child, and the sooner I am out of her way the happier for her!"

Clyde Douglas was looking at Winifred, who had risen when first her father broke forth, and stood for a moment, white and trembling and half-dazed. She went round, and tenderly and with most loving touch put her hands on the old man's shoulders and drew his gray head on her breast.

"Father, darling," she said, softly, "you will break my heart if you talk like that. Look up, dear. I dare say it won't be as bad as you think."

"Worse, worse, worse!" groaned he. "I have known of this for long; I had no right to keep it from you, but your mother— Well, never mind. We stand here, three penniless paupers."

"We stand here together," said the girl, bravely, "and we can never be quite poor so long as we have each other's affection, each other's sympathy and help. Darling, you are crushed by this now, but we will soon see a brighter side to it. We have health, and I have strength and youth. I will work for you father, dear."

"Everything must go—every stick and bit—jewels, clothes, house, everything—and then it won't be all paid; I shall still be a debtor as well as a pauper. The workhouse is the only



place for me now, Winnie—the workhouse for a few days, and then death!”

She grew a little whiter, but her clasp around him grew stronger and warmer.

“Never the workhouse for you, dearest, so long as your child has got hands to work or a brain to think! We will leave this house and the jewels,”—taking off her pearls, and laying them on the table—“and all the things that do not really make happiness. We will give everything up, and you and I, dear, and mother shall go away and live in a tiny cottage somewhere, honestly. That is the road toward happiness; and we shall be taken care of, never fear, darling. Let us try to pay all, and do our best. Father, dear,”—with a sudden tremble in her brave tones, and a lowering of her bright head on his,—“if there is anything I can do for you, tell me, and I’ll do it.”

“You can give over this insane, exaggerating tragedy,” said the lady-mother, stepping forward. “Really, I declare it makes me sick. You must be hard up, indeed, for a pleasing sensation, I think, to make this fuss out of an unimportant mistake like this. Mr. Douglas, I assure you that is all it is. Winnie and her father are so excitable. They are always getting up scenes of this kind. They worry me to death. Would you take the child out into the garden, and calm her?”—turning, sweetly, to the young man—“she takes such notice of every word you say—and leave the poor creature to me,” contemptuously touching her ruined husband; “I know how to manage him.”

“Let me stay with him,” implored Winnie, tightening her clasp upon his neck again.

“You shall not stay with him! You will soon have him out of his mind (such as he has got) if you go on in this ridiculous, most uncalled for, revolting way! Go out into the fresh air, child, and become calm.”

She took her forcibly by the arm as she spoke, and pushed her through the window; and Winnie, who had never disobeyed her mother in her life, with a choked sob, went out, and Douglas followed her into the calm, balmy air.

For a few moments they stood side by side in silence under the stars, with the scents from the flowers rising up sweet and strong around them, and a faint, contented twittering from the sleepy birds in the shrubbery the only sound to break the night’s stillness.

“Mr. Douglas,” began the girl, as they slowly crossed the lawn, “tell me how best I can earn money, will you, quickly. You see I am only a girl, and inexperienced and young, I am sorry to say, but I have been well educated, and I think I pick up things pretty quickly. Now, would it be best to become

some kind of clerk or a book-keeper, school-mistress or music-teacher? I hate teaching, but that does not matter. I have always understood fancy-work pays abominably, and I have not it in me to write books or music. I might paint on china, but would that earn my living, do you think?”

“You earn a living in this cruel, wicked world!” he said, gently. “Miss Erlescombe, is it really so bad as you and your father say?”

“It really is! I have heard hints of the kind before, but though I took no notice of them, so that it all came upon me with a shock to-night, I know it is true! We are ruined—hopelessly!” with a little kind of a sob.

“Miss Erlescombe, when I saw you just now, I thought—”

“Well? Something complimentary, I hope?”—trying to turn with her old brightness as he paused.

“Dare I tell you? I am glad that this thing has fallen upon you! Come into this walk here,”—taking her hand.

“Well, that is a kind thing to say, I must observe. I shall not come into this walk here—nasty damp place! I don’t want a cold in addition to—to everything! You are glad that I am wret—wretched! Well, that does sound like a true friend, I must say! That does sound nice!”

“It sounds dastardly, mean, selfish; but so it is! I have been making up my mind to go away to-morrow—to leave you, never to see you again!”

“Oh, don’t let me disturb your mind,” cried she, with another little sob, which she tried proudly to swallow. “This won’t be a pleasant house to stay in now, I know. But you need not have waited for this excuse to tear yourself away. The moment you had become tired of your visit we would have let you go.”

“Oh, what a blind child it is!” he said. He had never relinquished her hand, and now he gathered up the other little soft one, holding them both close and firmly against his heart.

“Winnie, do you believe in love or pride?”

“I am sure I don’t know what I believe in!”—shortly. “I don’t believe in having my hands held when I want to use them; it—it is most inconvenient.”

“Do you believe in a love so strong that, short as has been its growth, you know it is part of your life forevermore, strive to flee from it as you may? Do you believe in a pride so strong that because you are poor, and the object of your love is rich—because you are low-born, and she is not, you would die sooner than ask from her the boon you covet above everything this world can give? Can you imagine what it is for such love, after days of wretched strife, suddenly to find the obstacles removed, the object brought down to the level where it may be won?”



She trembled as his words came thick and fast. She did not answer.

"Winnie, now if a man, poor as yourself, but loving you with a might and devotion no earthly change can change, offers you such home as he has got, asks you to allow him to work for you, and guard you and cherish you, to take care of your parents also—though he has only what he earns, it would be enough to save you from the toil you propose—and that with *your* happiness for an incentive, he would go higher and do better and more than he has cared to do when only his own wants were in question, how should you answer him?"

She looked up suddenly, her sweet, starry eyes meeting his clearly and solemnly, her voice thrilled and low:

"If he were the man I loved, and he came to me when he would with the news that he loved me, rich or poor, oh, Clyde, do you think that would matter? If he came with his love and asked for mine, I would give it him gladly, unsparingly, wholly. I would rather he had come to me when I was rich, because then I should have seemed to have more to give; but if it was his will to come only to me in poverty, then a thousand, thousand times I should bless and thank the stroke that had taken from me money to give me—love!"

Her tones in their deep, heartfelt earnestness almost failed in the last syllables. Her glance fell as the sweet sensitive color flooded her face, and in confusion at the impulse that had carried her out of herself, she hid it upon the hands he held.

"My darling!" he said in a wild passion of delight.

And then the first lover's kiss they had ever known fell on Winnie's lips.

"Mother," she said, coming shyly into the drawing-room a little while afterward, "we have—we have something to tell you."

Mrs. Erlescombe was sitting in the light from the wax-candles with an anxious look on her face which took from it all its beauty; but when Winifred's tell-tale voice spoke, she rose with a sudden beaming smile, and extending her arms as if for an embrace, murmured, "My children, do I guess the truth?"

"I have asked Winnie to do me the honor of marrying me," said the young man, simply. "She has promised to be my wife if her parents will give their consent."

"For their darling's happiness what would they not give?" murmured the parent. "I have put my poor husband to bed—he was ill; but, coy ones, I can promise you everything you require."

"But before I ask from either you or her a promise," continued Douglas, gravely, "it is only right that I should tell you something which may affect your decision. I am not wholly what I seem,"

"Indeed!"—in beaming affected surprise; adding to herself, with a chuckle, "Now it is coming out."

"Though I pass by the name of Clyde Douglas, it is not the name to which I have a right. It is, as you may say, a fancy one I have given myself."

"Now, how interesting!"—looking almost too radiant, and smoothing her *moire* flounces. "Winnie, dearest, come hither and listen."

"And what are you by profession, dear Mr. Douglas? Of course now you have no secrets from your future wife and her mother. Of course it is of no importance what you are"—airily. "I see you, and that is sufficient; but still we should like to hear all about you—everything, I mean, that you care to tell."

"I am a clerk in a merchant's office," said the young man, stepping forward, and leaning one hand upon a chair, looking manly, handsome, and noble, more like a prince than a clerk. "I am a clerk with a salary of only twelve hundred a year at present; but I have every prospect of a rise. My employers, I believe, are satisfied with me; and for Winnie"—turning to her with a smile—"I shall work harder than I could do for myself."

Winnie stole up and put a hand through his, while her mother sat smiling, though the smile had become a little fixed.

Douglas continued:

"My father was a wealthy man and a scoundrel. I do not know his name, and I have never seen his face! My mother was by nature a lady, by occupation a dressmaker."

He paused and looked at Mrs. Erlescombe a moment; then went on:

"My father married her privately, and to please him she kept it secret and bore the scorn of her friends and the loss of her home uncomplainingly. He left her before I was born. She had as hard a life as any a woman could have thrust upon her. Unkindly treated and deserted by the man she loved, and for whom she had given up everything, looked down upon by her friends, with a child as well as herself to support, she toiled night and day uncomplaining until her body, not her spirit, gave way. She taught me what a perfect woman was, and then she died broken-hearted—slain, I say" (his deep tones growing harder and slower), "by the scoundrel who had sworn to love and cherish her. After her death a strange thing happened for me. An unknown hand, with money in it, came forward and put me in college (at Yale, of all places, where I learned gentlemanly tastes and associations), clothed, fed, and paid for me until I was twenty, when it suddenly disappeared, and then I stood alone to earn my own living and fight my own battles."

"So far I have done the former honestly and the latter successfully. I have tried to dis-



cover, but failed, the hand to which I am indebted for the education I value more highly than I should do a mint of money."

As he ceased speaking there was no sound but a kind of gasp from Mrs. Erlescombe. She was trying to speak, but could not. She stood up, supporting herself by the table, and then she managed to hiss forth:

"Young man, is this the truth?"

"Every syllable of it, I solemnly swear!" he replied, earnestly.

"And the whole truth?" her voice rising to an unpleasant scream, reminding one of peacocks.

"The whole truth as far as I know it!"

"Then," she said, rustling suddenly in her pockets, and bringing forth an eyeglass, "whose is this? What is the meaning of this, please?"

"This!" said he in surprise. "Why, I lost this ages ago—the first day I came here, I believe!"

"You believe rightly. What is there on it, pray?"

"On it? I never noticed anything. Oh, I see, initials and a coat of arms. Now where did I get it? I remember I got it from Claude Dunhaven. We were great friends at Yale—we are friends now."

"And Mr. Dunhaven"—her voice was scarcely a whisper—"was not he coming here *incog.* for fishing?"

"Ah, he was—he was coming for a few days, but his sister's death interfered with his plans, and I came alone."

"Then you may go back alone!" Mrs. Erlescombe hesitating a moment whether to faint or become violent, decided upon the latter. "You are not wanted here—I can tell you that, young man, being what *you are*! And if you think I am going to allow my daughter to marry a man with antecedents like yours, you are very much mistaken, that is all! We don't want you here any more. You are *low*! Perhaps you'll go!"

"Mother," ejaculated Winnie, turning a deathly face and imploring eyes, "you said just now—"

"Silence, miss! I say what I please in my own house!"

"You will, perhaps, permit me to remark that you contradicted yourself rather flatly," said Douglas, with lips that had turned white, but which smiled sarcastically. "The difference between your gushing reception of me just now and your present insults, scarcely springs, I take it, from the simple tale I have just told you."

"Never you mind what it springs from!" Mrs. Erlescombe's manners, which had been carefully acquired, were apt to lose their polish under strong excitement. "You just take

yourself off, and make room for your betters, will you?—or I shall ring for the servant to pack you off! I will have you taken up for pretending to be what you are not!"

"Mother," cried Winifred, boldly, "you are forgetting that you are a lady, I think!"

"Is it possible to forget a fact never in existence?" soliloquized the young man, quietly.

"Silence, minx!" shrieked the mother. "Mr. Douglas, how you can stay in a place where you are ordered out, passes my comprehension! It is a habit you have inherited from your low mother, the dressmaker, I suppose!"

"Woman, beware!" he hissed, facing her sternly. "Use what ladylike language you like to me, but dare say one syllable against a woman whose name you are not worthy to breathe, and you will see what I am like when roused!"

"I see what you are like when not roused—a pushing, common, insulting vagabond; and I wish you would be roused enough to take yourself away from folks who are sick of you!"

With a silent bow, he went out of the room, and Winnie followed him.

"Miss, come back!" her mother said. But for once she did not heed.

"Clyde," she said, clinging to his arm, and meeting his somewhat cold glance with her heart in hers, "what is going to happen I don't know; but believe this, my darling, believe this through everything—that I love you with every bit of heart I have got, and I shall love you only—you always, you alone, oh, my love, my darling!—through life, be it long or short!"

He did not answer, but his gaze softened as he met her eyes, and he put his hands on hers.

Just then a servant was crossing the hall, and Mrs. Erlescombe came hurrying out from the drawing-room.

"You can pack up my things and send them to the west-end!"

Douglas turned to the servant; then, shaking the little hand that clung to him, with another stately, graceful bow, he quitted the house.

As he walked silently and swiftly along down the road which led from Elm Grove to Blyton, he passed a man standing under a tree, apparently waiting for some one; a man, tall, foreign, and remarkable-looking, who, when he saw Douglas, gave his hat a touch and approached him.

"Do you want anything?" Douglas asked impatiently, presumably because the man was standing full in his way, and made no sign of getting out of it.

"I want a little conversation with you, Mr. Douglas."

"Then you can't have it, I am engaged just now,"



"You are only engaged in walking down this road, as far as I see. I will take a turn with you, and we can talk as we go," said the man pleasantly.

"I tell you"—more impatiently—"I am in no mood for gossip. I have other things to think of just now."

"Whatever you may have to think of, I'll bet you a hundred to one that your thoughts give first place to my gossip, as you term it," said the man impressively, "when you've had the luck to hear it."

"Out with it, then, without any more preamble,"—irritably.

"You'll permit me to ask you a question first, perhaps, Mr. Douglas. When did you see your father last?"

Haughtily, the young man turned, and looked at him without a word. Nowise daunted, the stranger chuckled and said: "Shall you know me again when you see me?—have you seen me before, think you?"

"I think I have. You were a kind of under-groom at the circus the other day."

"Well, you don't state a case as pleasantly as might be, but I was giving my valuable services to that circus for a day, which little incident proves to anybody versed in the readings of the times that I (being *unquest onably* born for higher things) must have been a little hard up. Now, being hard up the other day, it is only natural to suppose that I am not as rich as I could wish to be to-day, and so if there is anything about me anybody wishes to buy, now is the time to buy it cheap. About me there is a something that you, Clyde Douglas, would do well to buy for any sum it is in your power to raise—information, past, present, and future about your father."

"Prove your words," said the young man laconically, keeping his searching gaze upon the man.

"For nothing? I thank you, I am not so hard up for brains as that. For a ten-dollar bill now, ridiculous small sum, I'll give you enough information—genuine thing, no deception—to put you into the way of claiming the name you've a right to. I'll restore you to your parent."

"If you can give me such information as I shall esteem genuine and useful in discovering my parentage, I will pay you ten dollars after I have proved its worth," said Douglas quietly.

"Done with you!" said the man, bringing forth a greasy book and a knowing-looking pencil. "For ten dollars I'll put you in the way of a thing that may be worth any amount to you, and I'll trust to you to treat me fair afterward if it turns out the good thing I expect. And as it is no good losing time about a trifling matter like this, I'll accompany you up to town to-

morrow, first train (you pay expenses, of course), and after a few preliminaries I'll just introduce you face to face with your father. You pay after you have him proved sound and right; that is all honest and fair, is not it?"

"It sounds business-like, at any rate."

"It sounds a wonderful cheap bargain, ten dollars for information that may (if you play your cards properly) alter your whole position in life. Ten dollars for information that if you spent a lifetime and a fortune you could not get for yourself. Why, it is dirt cheap. I only do it for you because, to tell the truth, I've got a kind of sneaking kindness for you, Clyde, my boy!"

"It is remarkable kindness, seeing that we have met but once before, to my knowledge," said Clyde, drawing coldly back from the friendly slap on his arm.

"Your knowledge does not embrace everything. One always has to be reminding young fellows of that," observed the horsey man sententiously. "I was born before you, Douglas. I don't want to remind you of it in any disparaging spirit, but I have seen a thing or two that you have not, my boy."

"I should say you had," replied the other significantly.

"I have seen your father," laughed the man. "Set eyes upon him only a short while ago, which reminded me of you. I was having a look for you, but I've been abroad almost since you were born. Now you would not think it," putting on a confidential air, and drawing himself up—"but between twenty and thirty years ago I was a very smart-looking young fellow."

"I would not doubt your word. Without it, I own the thought would not have occurred to me."

The stranger laughed.

"You are a cool card, you are! 'Pon my word, now, I like you. Well, honor bright, I was as smart a fellow as you would see between here and New York—a trifle wild, perhaps, just always a little fond of betting; but for the rest, just the kind a girl would fall in love with, I should have thought. However, I fell in love with your mother. You need not look like that. I did honestly and truly, only she would not have me, because of a namby pamby man with his gentlemanly airs and graces, who came into the town for a month, saw her pretty face, and cut me out. He married her. Now, mind you, there ain't many know that; but I was in the church, and saw it done. He married her, right enough; but afterward, like the sneak he was, got her to keep it quiet, and she, poor soft creature (ah, she had better have had me), thought everything he said was true, and behaved ac-



cordingly. Well, the end was that she died, over-worked, over-worried, over-tired of waiting, and hoping, and loving, and believing, and being deceived, and scorned, and forgotten, and deserted. She died, and you was a little chap when I saw her, just before she died, and she held you up to me, and she said: 'Do him a good turn if ever you can, Jacques (my name's Jacques). I said: 'My dear, I will;' and it is along of that promise (I'm not one to forget his promises, you see) that I offer you this present information so wonderful and ridiculous cheap, Clyde Douglas. Another thing is, I owe that man a grudge, which you may be surprised to hear I've never had the chance of paying out yet. Now I think that by hurling you upon him, proving the relationship and all that, I shall do it about as neatly as it ever could be done. But, Mr. Douglas, I'll not waste time in argument, but take your own terms. To-morrow will suit you—eight-ten train?"

"Eight-ten to-morrow will suit me," replied Douglas.

## CHAPTER VII.

### "AM I YOUR SON?"

MR. HAMPTON sat in his office, with the work that had accumulated during his holiday surrounding him; with letters unopened before him; with a clerk waiting for a message downstairs, and a telegram that had just arrived lying forgotten in his hand; and he sat with his head leaning back, his eyes fixed vacantly on the dingy opposite wall; his thoughts at Elm Grove.

"A lady, wishing to see you, sir, is waiting below," said a clerk, opening the door after two taps had been given by him unheeded.

"I am engaged," said Mr. Hampton, moving his lips without any other feature. "You can attend to her, Lucas."

But a light footstep sounded on the stairs, and gently walked past the clerk.

"You must see me, Mr. Hampton," said a sweet, tremulous voice.

Then, with a glance at his master's countenance, the discreet clerk withdrew, and shut the door after him.

Winifred raised her veil, and showed her pretty face, without an atom of color in it, her blue eyes with red, tearful rim round them, and her lips pressing back unshed tears.

She looked like an unhappy, beautiful child in the face—like a graceful, stylish woman in figure, as she stood in a dark-blue dress, with cunning little glimpses of crimson silk about it, with a little poke bonnet to match, pressing down her waving hair, and a parasol held in hands that were perfectly gloved, and above which lace ruffles and bangle bracelets appeared.

"Take a seat," said Mr. Hampton, speaking as a poker might do if it had a voice. "To what am I indebted for this honor?"

"Oh, don't speak to me like that!" said poor Winnie, sitting down and letting her parasol drop upon deeds and papers as she clasped her hands. "Mr. Hampton, I've—I've come to—to try what I can do for—for—to save papa—to save him from the ruin you know all about."

"Yes. In what way do you propose to act?"

"Do you know what has happened to us at Elm Grove?" she questioned, desperately. "There are men in the house who do exactly as they like, go where they like, look at what they like. Papa is just like a madman, shut up in a room wailing and crying and meaning and blaming himself, until it breaks my heart,"—the large tears gathering in the eyes still bravely raised to the broker's. "I cooked the dinner yesterday, for the cook would not. Our servants have nearly all left us; we could not ask them to stay. There are tickets, numbers stuck upon all our furniture, chairs, and everything."

"Exactly; in preparation for their sale. And your lady-mother, my kind and attentive hostess—may I ask after her?"

His thin lips pressed together, and his eyes glittering, as he turned to her with the smooth inquiry.

She turned away from him impulsively.

"You look as if you did not know what mercy was," she said, in stifled tones.

"I do not boast of an intimate acquaintance with that quality. I know what revenge is!"—slowly.

"And do you intend to have it to the full? Oh, Mr. Hampton!"

"Oh, Miss Erlescombe! is there any reason why I should not have the money that is my right from people who have treated me as you and your two delightful parents have done?"

"You ought to have your money; you shall have it some day. Mr. Hampton, I would see that you had it, every farthing, in time."

"Thanks! You are very kind. I prefer to see after it myself at my own time."

She rose and approached him, trembling in nervousness, and attempting to speak once or twice before words would come to her.

"You are anxious to say something more to me before you go," he said pointedly, and using a tone like ice.

"I want to ask if—if I have brought this in any way upon my parents?" she faltered, gaspingly. "I mean that if when you were so kind as to want me to marry you, if I had said yes, would it have been all different?"

"According to usual manners and customs,



a betrothal between you and me would have made an entire difference," he said, looking at her coldly.

She burst into tears, hiding her white face in her hands, and speaking in a broken-hearted kind of wail.

"Then, Mr. Hampton, I can't bear it to see my father like that. I promised to do anything I could to save him, and if—if you care to be engaged to me now—I mean, I do respect you, and it was awfully good of you to think of me, and—and I'll try to love you as hard as ever I can, and if you will bear with me and have a little patience, and not expect too much from me all at once"—shrinking as he neared her by one step—"I will make you a good wife, if you want me for your wife now, after you know everything."

"What is everything?" he questioned, sternly. "Hide nothing from me, Winifred Erlescombe."

"I am not going to—I won't, indeed. I had given my heart and my promises to somebody else, Mr. Hampton; but now I think—"

"Now you think you can come and give the empty kernel of your heart and your broken promises to propitiate me. Upon my word, Miss Erlescombe, you honor me. As you are telling me everything, perhaps you will inform me how my money has accomplished this delicious change of resolution?" sneered he.

"Your money?" She looked up in such a flame of indignation as dried her tears and colored her cheeks. "Your paltry, hateful money could never attract me. Mr. Hampton, the man I love has nothing but the spare pittance he earns to share with me; yet it would be happiness—oh, what do I say?—bliss, rapture, perfect happiness to work for and with him, to live like the poorest cottager, to toil like a galley slave with him." And her voice softened in ineffable tenderness that said far more than her impetuous words. "But how can I for the sake of my own happiness sacrifice the parents who brought me into the world, and who have cared for me for nineteen years, when by the sacrifice of myself I can save their declining days from disgrace and misery—I can lengthen their lives, and let them end in peace and prosperity? Self-sacrifice, good men say, is the noblest quality poor humanity can strive after. I don't say I am good; I know I am bad, horrid selfish, vain. I have tried my utmost to try and make myself think I need not do this; that if I kept true to Clyde Douglas I ought to get my own happiness in disobedience to my parents' commands and entreaties. But, Mr. Hampson, I dare not do it. There seems a dreadful fog round me, and I can hardly tell right from wrong"—putting up her hands to her head. "But I must save

my father, if in me lies the power. I must try and do what I can to save him from what he thinks a thousand times worse than death. And, Mr. Hampton, I am not speaking nicely—I am too wretched; but I am telling you the exact truth, and so honestly as I tell you that, so honestly and earnestly do I mean to do what I know my duty will be if you—if you care to accept my terms. I mean to forget the past, and think only of you, and will strive to change gratitude and respect into what you would like better. Mr. Hampton, do you believe me?"

He took her two hands closely in his, and bent his searching but not unkind gaze upon her, as he spoke in a softer tone than she had ever heard from him before.

"I do believe you. I could trust a wife whose sense of duty was so strong toward her parents—I could trust her never to disgrace nor deceive her husband, never fail in one letter of her duty toward him; but I could not trust a perverse, wayward, human heart to learn love from duty; and if ever I marry, I must have love freely and unbought from my wife. I had it once, and I valued it not. My punishment to-day is that this poor substitute is offered me to be content with, and I decline it. I decline it; for, child, do not you see that you would do wrong to more people than you would do good to by this proposal of yours? You would wrong, in the first instance, the man you really love—wrong him irreparably and cruelly, a wrong that can never be atoned to him if he loves you as I suppose he does. You would also wrong me. To give me an empty husk for a full heart would be a dangerous gift—poison hidden in nectar, a sting within a caress. You would wrong your parents, for surely their child's happiness is dearer to them than their own; and lastly, you would wrong yourself."

"Myself?" she repeated, with a little, impatient shrug.

"Yourself. You are a better girl, a nobler character, than I thought. Your words to-day have touched springs in my heart that I thought had been dried up forever. You have made me realize that there is a higher power in the world than money; you have brought back to my remembrance—"

A tap at the door interrupted him, and the discreet clerk spoke from outside it.

"Here is a party most anxious to see you, sir. I told them you were engaged, but they say they will wait any length of time to see you."

"Let them wait!" said his master, curtly.

"I am detaining you," said Winnie, rising and looking for her veil; but again, contrary to all established custom and regulation, visitors had followed the clerk up to the private



sanctum, and as the young lady spoke, the door opened wider, and three persons entered unannounced. The first was a man whom Winnie had seen twice before—once as under-groom at the circus, and a second time in the woods by the river. He advanced with an easy swagger and disagreeable smile, gave a little surprised familiar bow to Miss Erlescombe, and took a seat without being asked. After him came a stout, commonplace, rather vulgarly-dressed woman, who stood and fanned herself with a red handkerchief, and panted a good deal after the steepness of the stairs.

"Lord, ain't it close herel!" she said.

The third person was a gentleman, tall, distinguished-looking and handsome, at sight of whom Winnie's whole face flushed first deepest crimson, then went deadly pale.

Mr. Hampton turned to him, as the only one of the party whom he knew.

"Mr. Douglas," he said, "I look to you to explain this intrusion."

"There's a pleasant and unpleasant way of stating everything," said the circus man facetiously; "you've a knack of hitting upon the latter, I'm afraid, Mr. Hampton."

Mr. Hampton looked at him chillily.

"If you are the spokesman, sir, perhaps you will state your business, as quickly (never trouble about pleasantness) as possible."

"Then, to hit the nail gently on the head," said the man, rising, and striking an attitude, "this lady here—come forward, my dear"—pushing the stout woman a little forward—"is your old friend, Mrs. Barnes, as sent you a message, but to which you paid no attention. She has been abroad, and lost your address, or you would have heard from her before. You know all about her, don't you? She had a niece—a sweet, fragile, lovely girl, who sewed all day, and whom you took for walks by the river on summer balmy evenings when the birds sung of love, and she listened to them and to you, and, poor trusting moth, she smiled, and believed every word you said. And then you impulsively married her, you know, taking good care, though, to keep it from her aunt, who led the poor girl a hardish life in consequence." The stout lady hereupon applied the red handkerchief to her eyes, and gave utterance to a sob. "But, to strike the nail hard on the head," continued the man, waving a hand theatrically toward Clyde Douglas, "there stands your lawful son and heir—Clyde Hampton, instead of Douglas. It ain't such a pretty name, but right is right, and must be attended to."

"You speak falsely!" said Hampton, with livid lips and agitated eyes.

"Do I?" laughed the man. "I know I don't; Mrs. Barnes, here, knows I don't. Your son, here,"—touching the tall figure that stood

like a marble statue—"will soon know I don't. You don't deny that you married Rhoda Barnes, and that you knew—although it was after you had basely deserted her—you know when your son was born? You know that the mother died, and you never saw the boy; but you knew how it lived with people into whose hands you had placed it until old enough to go to school. Then, afterward you know, you sent him to Yale. You know how many years you paid for him there. You know that when he left, you got him the situation you wished him to think his own hands had secured. You know you did that all through other hands, anxious that the boy should never know that his father had given a thought to him. Then, once started in the world, your conscience was easy. I suppose you thought you had done enough, and you left him, never having seen him yet, to fight his own battles and never trouble you with his presence. You are outwitted, Mr. Hampton; he stands before you there to-day—the boy that called Rhoda Hampton mother; the boy that lived with the clergyman at E—; the boy that went to Yale under the name of Clyde Douglas—your son!"

"Lord, ain't it close!" ejaculated Mrs. Barnes, rolling her handkerchief into a ball, with which to vigorously polish her forehead. Clyde Douglas advanced one step and faced his father.

"Am I your son?" he demanded in slow sternness. "Are you the man whom from babyhood I have regarded with reprobation and contempt? the man who, to gratify some whim of pride or fickle fancy, condemned his innocent wife and child to a disgrace that crushed the life out of the one and warped and embittered the upgrowing of the other? Was it you, who by cruel neglect and base desertion, tortured to death the trustful, loving, angel heart you had promised to cherish and worship? Look at her!" unfastening the locket hidden behind his watch and putting it into Hampton's hands. "She never uttered one reproachful word, never said one unkind thing of you. She would have taught me to reverence and respect you if it might have been, but, child as I was, I knew a true parent from a false one. I saw her daily sinking under your callous inhuman conduct, and when she died I was worse than orphaned. I am not ungrateful for what you have done for—since her death," slightly raising his voice. Hampton attempted to speak. "But what else have I to thank you for? For a stigma and slur upon my name under which my feelings have quivered ever since. Alone, uncared for and unloved, the lowliest child in a laboring cot has had a kindlier bringing up than I; you who cared not whether I lived or died



whether I grew up a blessing or a curse to my country—cared for nothing but that our relationship should *not* be brought home to you—you stand before me unwillingly to-day. For the first time we meet face to face, my father and I; and I say”—speaking with more deliberate and sterner emphasis—“I wish you to do me justice; I demand of you that you acknowledge me as your son—you give me the name that is rightly mine; and then, if we never meet again, you will regret it less than I!”

“Lord, don’t they speak beautiful now! Just like a play, ain’t it?” Mrs. Barnes remarked, filling up a little pause that occurred.

“You are too hard on me,” said Hampton, looking up from the locket his eyes had been fixed upon, while Winnie’s ready, quick sympathy started at the change in his voice and in his altered countenance. “I was not wholly callous, unfeeling, heartless. I loved your mother when I gave her this locket with my likeness in it. I loved her when we married. I never meant to wrong her, but I was not my own master. Circumstances were against me, and ambition proved stronger than love. I was young then, with a place to make in the world, and my future lay in the hands of an uncle to whom a *mesalliance* would have been an unpardonable crime, so I persuaded Rhoda to keep our marriage secret, and when she wrote after I had left her, begging for the truth to be acknowledged, I, afraid to trust my own weakness, left her letters unopened and unanswered; but I have kept them always with me, as your mother found out”—turning to Winnie—“when she pried into my private belongings. When the unexpected news of my wife’s death reached me, I suffered—doubt it if you like—only I was climbing still. The ascent was then just at its steepest, and I could not wait for idle sentiment—I could not be burdened with a child. I had hoped to make my wife happy and prosperous, and to atone for all her sorrows when my uncle died; but she had been gone for years when that time came, when I stood a rich man and my own master. It was too late then to proclaim to the world the story of years ago. I decided, and it was better to spend money upon you boy, than sentiment. I had no wish to see you, I own, for I desired to bury the past in deepest oblivion. To-day has disinterred it—*against* my will.”

“It only belongs to me to say,” spoke Mrs. Barnes, stepping forward with a heated face, wiping her pocket handkerchief vigorously—“it becomes me to say what I was brought up for, and then by your leave I’ll stop in this place no longer, for I am stout, and don’t suit me, this musty old hotel”—with a glance of disgust. “I only certify that I had a niece—a pretty virtuous girl called Rhoda

—and I only wish I had known what this gentleman”—turning to Jacques—“has shown me in the register; that the gentleman (Hampton) who paid her attention married her. I am only competent to remark that she had a baby called Clyde, and that he had a strawberry-mark on his arm similar, exact (and very peculiar it was) to one on the arm of this young gentleman”—turning to Douglas—“which he has just shown me. It only becomes me to observe that when they took the boy from me after his ma died—from me as was his natural protector, and who kept him when no pay was given—I think it was shameful to take him away after it was!—they put him first with a clergyman at E—, and then to school, and I went home to old England, but I recognize him to-day because of his eyes (they are like my dear girl’s precisely; he favors her, bless her!) and the undoubted strawberry-mark which can’t be mistook, as I have said. Now I’ve said my say.”

“And we will leave this happy family,” said Jacques, taking the stout lady’s arm pleasantly. “I shall see you again shortly, Mr. Douglas, I suppose,”—significantly—“having fulfilled my part of our compact.”

“I fulfill mine,” said the young man, drawing out a twenty-dollar bill and putting it into the other’s hand. “That is more than we agreed on, but your service has been more thorough and satisfactory than I expected.”

“Have you a large income?” inquired Hampton, as the door closed upon stout Mrs. Barnes and high-spirited Mr. Jacques, “or do you consider this such a valuable service that you must overpay a scoundrel like that?”

Winifred’s slight figure had been hidden by Mrs. Barnes’s comfortable proportions.

Douglas’s glance now fell upon her for the first time. Hampton saw the change that swept over his face, and bit his own lip as his son sprung forward eagerly.

“Winnie!” he said.

“Clyde!” she faltered, half-putting her hand in his, and drawing back confused and hesitating, glancing first at one then at the other of the two men, and coloring and trembling painfully.

“Are you offended with me?” Clyde inquired in hurt tones. “May I see you for five minutes alone?”

“I have five minutes business with Mr. Hampton, first,” replied she, firmly, her eyes shrinking from his, and she sat down because her limbs refused to stand. “I will meet you at Elm Grove or write to you, Clyde, to-morrow. I—I—”

She stopped because something seemed to rise in her throat and choke her utterance.

Clyde regarding her fixedly, mistook her agitation.

“I offer a thousand pardons for having in-



truded," he said, sarcastically, as he possessed himself of his hat and turned toward the door. "I had no idea of blundering in upon a *tete-a-tete* when I entered here on my own business. I will disturb you no longer."

With a cold, silent bow he would have departed, but Hampton arrested him.

"When shall I see you again?" he asked, hurriedly.

"If you require another interview in regard to the public recognition you are going to make, I presume, of our relationship, I am at your service at any time. I go back to my work on Thursday, but a telegram will bring me at any time required," was the cold response.

"I did not say I was prepared for any public acknowledgment of relationship. Privately, I can and will help you, pecuniarily or in any other way," said the broker, looking at him fixedly.

"Privately I scorn your help, your money, yourself! I want justice, that is all. Affection, I suppose, is in vain to hope for; one can not squeeze milk out of a flint,"—bitterly. "But justice I demand and shall have."

"You may as well shake hands before you go," said Hampton, putting forth his hand weakly and unsteadily. "I have never borne you ill-will, and for what injury I have caused you I am willing to atone and make substantial amends."

"Substantial amends!" said the young man, refusing the offered hand. "Old as you are, Mr. Hampton, it yet remains for you to learn that money is not the dearest thing in this world, and that there are things it cannot buy or pay for. Grasp it, treasure it, if you value it so highly, but do not thrust it forward to stanch the wounds you have caused!"

"And you will not shake hands?" said the elder man, his voice more feeble than its wont.

"There is no affection, no semblance of friendship between us," answered Clyde, relentlessly. "Why should we pass the mockery of an empty form? It is waste of time."

"You will leave me this?" said the lawyer, holding up the pictured face in the locket, and speaking with subdued eagerness and pleading.

"Yes, I will leave you that," replied the other, after a moment's hesitation, "for a couple of days."

"Clyde," faltered Winnie, as he reached the door, "are you not going to say good-by to me, even?" as he slowly went on down the dark stairs. "Clyde, won't you speak to me?—just one more word?" running to the stairs with outstretched hands and imploring, anguished eyes, that he never turned to meet. "Oh, Clyde!"

But the steady step went on unfalteringly down the stairs and into the street.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### A HAPPY ENDING.

At the junction at which passengers change from New York to Blyton, two men were pacing up and down the platform, waiting for the train. The evening twilight was falling, and the train was late.

Those two were almost the only passengers upon that particular platform, and it was difficult for them to avoid a rencounter sometimes, as both walked restlessly to and fro. Yet somehow, by accident or mutual design, it was avoided. They never came near enough for a sign of recognition to be strictly required of either.

"Why did I choose this train?" the young man, Clyde Hampton, asked angrily of himself. "Why am I going down at all again to this place? Only because I know I must see her again; for the last time it will probably be. Though it is against my better judgment, against my resolution, against my will, I must see her again."

"Why did I choose this train of all the trains in the twenty-four hours?" the elder man, John Hampton, asked bitterly of himself as he paced up and down. "What I am going to do when I get to this place, I know not. Yet an uncontrollable impulse urges me on. I must go, and when I get there I must decide something. It is contrary to every habit I have formed in my life to act upon impulse, but I cannot help myself to-day."

The train was late, when a bell rung sharply, and the rush of steam and wheels sounded through the gloaming, and standing at the very edge of the platform, Mr. Hampton leaned forward as he had done scores of times before to see the advancing train. Perhaps he turned dizzy for an instant, perhaps his foot slipped, perhaps he overbalanced; but from whatever cause, he fell on the track before the express train rushing toward him, and, stunned by the fall, lay motionless.

Turning also to notice the train, Clyde saw the slip—the fall—the danger!

With a leap he gained the prostrate form, and raising it as if with the strength of a Hercules, he lifted it beyond the reach of the crushing, snorting engine, with its long train behind it, that shook the station as it rushed past. The slightest slip, and both men would have been ground to powder under the crushing wheels.

Mrs. Erlescombe sat with her husband and daughter in her boudoir that evening as the darkness came on.

The men in possession were in the drawing-room arranging the furniture for the sale that was fast approaching.

Winnie sat by her father's side with his hand in hers, and her head on his arm. She looked



pale, dejected, ill, with dark rims round her eyes, and weary, sad lines about the pretty mouth.

Mrs. Erlescombe held a handkerchief to her eyes, but it did not prevent her talking.

"Of course you stick up for your father, Winifred; you two always are everybody, and I nobody; but I don't care, I shall say what I think right, and what I shall say to his dying day—but for him, all would have been different. If I had had my way, you would have married Mr. Hampton quietly, and I should never be in this position. As to that young man Douglas, as he dared to call himself, words simply fail to express my opinion of him!"

"Don't say anything against him," said Winnie, tremblingly, "for if you do I must leave the room!"

"I am not going to be dictated to as to what I shall or shall not say by you, miss. A pretty pass, indeed, things have come to! That young man was a villain—I shall make you hear it—palming himself off on us, deceiving us right and left, trying to get hold of you by false pretenses!"

"Mother, he never pretended to be what he was not. No one was more surprised than he at your mistake. If you had not opened a foolish letter of my schoolfellow's—"

"And what business have you to receive such letters? I shall open them as long as you continue to have them. But for that fellow Douglas to dare propose to you—to presume to ask my consent!"

"Mother, I will not let even you talk to me like this!" said Winnie, rising indignantly.

But her father whispered, "Don't take any notice of her. You know she must talk, and it is mostly I who have got to listen to it." Then, more confidentially, leaning eagerly toward her, "Did you get any concessions out of Hampton, my dear, when you went to him yesterday? What did you say?"

"He promised to write his final decision," said the girl, sinking wearily back with a white look about her eyes and a hand pressed unconsciously upon her heart. "I—I—tried my very best, father dear," speaking more bravely. "I did everything I could for you."

"I am sure you did, child," patting her head. "But I wish he would write. In two days it won't be of much consequence what he decides as far as I am concerned. Do you think that if there is no letter from him to-morrow that if you went up again, little one—"

"Perhaps," said Winnie. "Father, you may rely upon it I will do what I can."

"What are you whispering about there, you two?" asked Mrs. Erlescombe, irritably.

"Really, I think you might respect my grief a little if you can't feel for me. I, who married so well, all my friends thought, and planned and wanted my daughter to marry so well, to be brought to this!"

"There's a bell!" said Winnie, rising nervously.

"Perhaps it is a letter, father."

"More men coming in!" exclaimed Mrs. Erlescombe, listening to the sounds in the hall.

"Did you expect any more of these auctioneers, Robert? I declare they are tramping one after the other up the stairs! No, Jane!" sharply, as the servant, after a tap, opened the door. "I won't have them in here! Take them down to join the others in the drawing-room. If that is not good enough for them I do not know what is. The peacock velvet chairs I chose myself, and the bric a-brac and the hangings."

"It is Mr. Hampton, ma'am," said the servant, quickly; and Mr. Hampton entered, Clyde walking beside him. One glance at the two faces told Winnie that some difference had taken place in their feelings toward one another since last she saw them. In utter astonishment, that, however, did not deprive her of speech, Mrs. Erlescombe rose and advanced toward them.

"Dear Mr. Hampton, this is an unexpected pleasure indeed! I have been so afraid that some little remarks of mine when we parted were misunderstood by you. I am glad indeed to welcome you again in the character of our most welcome and honored guest."

"I do not think I misunderstood the last remarks I heard from you, madam," said the lawyer, bluntly; "nor do I misunderstand you now, I fancy."

Sheshrunk away a little from his keen, satirical, confusing gaze, and looked virulently at Clyde Douglas.

"You have brought this young villain to expose him, I suppose? Mr. Hampton, it is needless. We know his deception, his plots, his lowness. We know—"

"Do you know his parentage?" inquired Hampton.

"I know that it is the lowest of the low. I know that indeed he was no fit associate or companion for you, dear Mr. Hampton. The particulars of his low birth I care not to know," waving her hand grandly—"but I know enough to—"

"Show, as usual, your want of judgment and sense!" finished the other quietly.

"Madam, you know a little of my private affairs, thanks to your prying into my secret correspondence. You are aware, I believe, that I had a wife and child. Permit me now to introduce the latter to you here. My son



and heir, Clyde Hampton!"—putting his hand upon his companion's shoulder, who smilingly bowed.

For once, Mrs. Erlescombe was bereft of speech. She simply stared and opened her mouth.

"Winnie has told you nothing of this, madam, I presume, from your blank look."

"Winifred tells me nothing. She never minds what shocks her poor mother has. She went up to New York, yesterday, without telling me a thing she did either before or after. If she went to plan with you this miserable, absurd, incredible joke, then I can only say I think you might have been better employed, both of you."

"Winnie had something better to do. Come here, child,"—putting out his hand to the girl. "You have no secrets from the present company, I suppose?" And as she shook her head, he continued, still holding her hand, "Winnie came up to my office, to try by every means in her power to induce me to save her father. She even offered herself as my bribe. She offered, if no other price could be accepted, to agree to the proposals of marriage I had made her."

"Dear, sensible, right-feeling girl!" murmured the mother. "But why was I not told of this?"

"But in her honest, straightforward way she admitted that her heart was given and her hand promised to another—(no, child, you need not shrink away; there is nothing to be ashamed of in the truth)—to Clyde Hampton, here; and so, before I gave Winifred any definite reply, I thought it wise to come down and interview her parents, to whom, surely, their child's happiness must be of greater importance than a house and land and furniture. I ask you both," turning slowly to them, "do you wish your daughter to marry the man to whom she has given the whole of her warm, young, strong affection—a man against whom not a syllable can be breathed—a man with health and strength, and a devoted love to give the wife of his choice?"

Winnie colored, and turned away.

Clyde silently looked at her.

"Or do you prefer that her life shall be wrecked—warped, shadowed forever—by uniting herself to a man who could, indeed, love her well, but to whom no feeling but daughterly kindness or gratitude could ever rise in her heart. Is she to be a wife smiling or weeping, loving or suffering? I ask you, her parents. She has shown willingness to sacrifice her whole chance of happiness for you; are you less generous than she?"

"I married without love myself," replied Mrs. Erlescombe, calmly. "I married for

position, for money, as I want Winifred to do; and I think Robert and I have jogged along very comfortably considering. Of course, we have hot words, like all married people, but—"

But Mr. Erlescombe had risen, his better feelings roused by the broker's speech—his thought impelled to words by his wife's last assertion.

"I say, let her marry the man she loves," he said, speaking decidedly for once in his life. "I did not know she was fighting against her heart when she agreed to the request I made. I retract that now, for my daughter is more to me than land or house. She is guiltless of, and she shall not suffer for, her parents' folly and weakness. Winnie, dear," standing upright, and looking, as he had not done for long, a picture of a fine old gentleman, "I give my consent to your marriage whenever you please."

"Simpleton!" breathed his wife; but before she had time to gasp any more, Hampton's clear, slow voice took up the story.

"My daughter," he said, and he drew forth a paper and put into her hand, "I give you my wedding-present—a present I give to yourself, not on account of your father's weakness or your mother's duplicity, but on account of your womanly love, truth, and self-devotion. It is the mortgage I hold on your father's property," he said, smiling as she opened it and raised dazed eyes to his. "You can burn it in those candles if you choose. And for my son's sake—my son who paid a debt of neglect and life-long injury by risking his own life to save mine," his voice thrilled and deepened as he looked at his son, and even Mrs. Erlescombe held her breath and listened to him, "I hand over, the day he is married, property to the amount of five thousand a year. He has brains and strength; he can earn more. I am rich and have few wants, and can easily spare this much. During my life I think my son and daughter will give me a welcome when I need rest and change and affection, and at my death Clyde will have everything I possess. Well, little woman, what is it?"

Winnie had crept to his side, and with arms twined round his had raised a glance intense, tearful, eloquent in its gratitude and admiration.

"Ob, Mr. Hampton!" was all she could falter.

"Oh, Miss Erlescombe, are not you going to destroy that paper, or must we leave you and Clyde to do it privately?"

"Ob, Mr. Hampton, it is too much! Give us half—a quarter!"

There came an uneasy expression into Mrs. Erlescombe's face, and she touched the girl as she whispered, "Winnie, dear, you are ungrateful!"



But Winnie protested.

"I am not ungrateful! You know better, Mr. Hampton. But I have behaved so badly, so heartlessly; and now this is too much—more almost than I can bear, more than we can ever hope to repay if we live to be—"

"Ancient Mariners!" interposed Hampton, smiling quietly. "You told me you looked upon me in that histrionic light once, Winnie."

"Don't remind me of all the rudeness that is making me loathe myself!" she cried sobbingly. "Oh, Mr. Hampton, I will try—indeed, indeed I will try to be worthy of your generosity! If you could just only look into my heart now—"

"Suppose I depute Clyde to do that?" said the broker lightly.

But Mrs. Erlescombe noticed a softening in his hard, keen eyes, as if he were about to shed tears—an unusual thing for him.

"Erlescombe," said he, "you and I will go down and dismiss these men below."

He treated the lady-wife with most sovereign contempt, but she arose in the most obsequious manner, and followed him.

"Let me hold a light for you, dear Mr. Hampton! Let me run down first, and see if the room is comfortable for you to enter! Let me give some orders for supper, may I? Is there anything you would particularly care for? Robert, you are showing our noble benefactor no attention at all. I am ashamed of you! Dear Mr. Hampton, mind that awkward turn in the stairs! Robert, can't you hold that candle to light him better, stupid?"

Clyde Hampton and Winifred stood together as the trio left them, with the light of the candles falling on her fair, sweet, agitated face, on her white dress and clasped hands, as she stood leaning against the chimney-piece. She did not look up to meet the earnest, thrilling glance that she felt upon her, but she did not shrink away when he took her hands in his and raised them to his neck.

"Winnie, so you do love me after all, little darling?"

"So your father says," she whispered, hiding her face on his breast.

"It is very refreshing to hear one's father says so, but I should like to hear it from my wife herself."

"I did not know you had got a wife, sir."

"Don't taunt me with what is no fault of mine. I will have one to-morrow, or next day, if it can be managed."

"I have a presentiment that it cannot be. 'Marry in haste, repent at leisure,' Mr. Hampton."

"Not if I marry you."

"Ah, that makes a difference, certainly."

As he answered his light tone vanished, and Winnie felt his heart beating as he clasped her to it.

"It makes all the difference between light and darkness, bliss and misery, life and death. Winnie, my darling, my sweetheart, I know it for a fact, but I want to hear it from your own lips, that you love me!"

"Oh, Clyde, it is a most unnecessary ceremony; but if you insist"—raising her lovely eyes, then drooping them before his ardent gaze, yet speaking with passionate intensity, a force he felt the strength of as she uttered the low words—"Clyde, my darling, I love you better than my life!"

It was a gay wedding, and Blyton was *en fete* when the only daughter of Robert Erlescombe, of Elm Grove, married the only son of Mr. Hampton, the rich stock broker.

Eva Lowrie, the schoolfellow who had written the gushing epistle about Claude Dunhaven was one of the bridesmaids, in crimson satin and white lace, who followed the bride in her trailing cream moire and silk.

The evening before the wedding she said to her friend, "Oh, Winnie, I never found time to write and contradict that statement about Claude Dunhaven coming to your neighborhood *incog.*, but I suppose it never affected you. You were too busy with his friend, my dear—the very handsomest man I ever saw, Winnie—to look about for even a millionaire. He was engaged to his cousin, after all, so you could not have caught him; but I think, my friend, you are about as happy as you can be, as it is."

"I am," said Winnie, with a soft glance across to where her lover stood, "as happy as any human being can be; and"—rising and putting her hand on her future father-in-law's arm as he approached her—"I owe it all to you, Mr. Hampton!"



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